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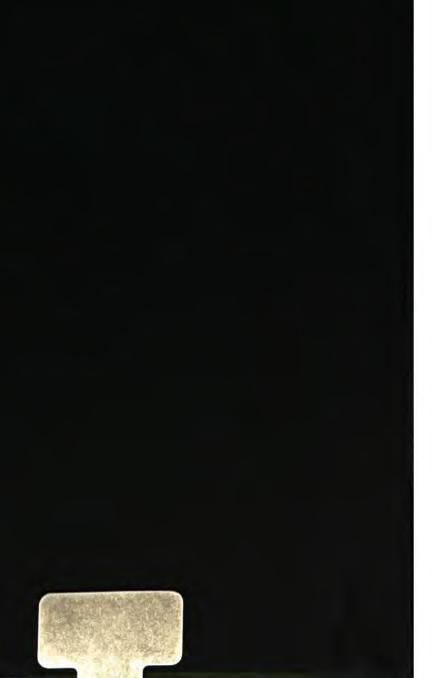
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# YEARS AGO













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# YEARS AGO.

A Story.

BY

# SYDNEY LEVER.

Author of "Fireflies."

### London:

REMINGTON AND CO.

NEW BOND STREET, W.

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# CHAPTER I.

#### FIUME.

"ELL, Meta, and what do you think of Fiume?" asked George Gresham of me on the day succeeding our arrival there, when, after the customary morning salutations had been exchanged, we all took our places at the breakfast table. "Did I say too much in praise of it?"

"No, indeed, nor half enough," was my eager reply, "I am delighted with it. Flossy and I have been out on a reconnoitring expedition since seven o'clock this morning, and are quite agreed that it

is the nearest approach to Fairyland it has ever been our lot to visit. Aren't we, Floss?" I asked of my golden-haired niece, who, with bright eyes and rosy cheeks, was standing in her accustomed place at my elbow.

- "It is booful," was the concise reply, delivered with that gravity and decision at once so quaint and pretty in a child of five.
- "Any dragons, Floss?" suggested her brother slyly.
- " No, nor silly boys," said Flossy with dignity.
- "You caught that, Master Phil!" laughed George, while my sister—who dreaded Flossy's sharp tongue as much as my brother-in-law was amused by it, hastened to ask me—
  - "And what is the town like, Meta?"

- "Like no town I ever saw before," I replied. "The one half of it—that nearest the sea, is clean, modern, and unpicturesque to a degree; the other half, or 'old town,' as it is called, which is entered through a low archway in a sort of tower with a clock in it—is steep, ill-paved, and squalid-looking."
- "A droll idea of Fairyland," remarked George.
- "I don't know that; there's something interesting and uncommon about the very narrowness and darkness of the streets, with their crumbling old houses and shutterless windows suggestive of spinning-wheels and Aladdin's lamps."
- "And Princes in red and gold," broke in Floss.
- "Brava, Floss!" applauded her father with a merry laugh.

"But go on, Meta, tell us more of the town," said Florence eagerly, at the same time quietly laying her hand on Flossy's shoulder.

"Well, but there's little more to tell. There's a theatre of course, but closed at this season. A casino, with a very pretty ball-room, as I hear. An hotel—we can see it from our windows—to the right of the square. The Governor's house, with a tiny public garden of acacia trees in front of it. A fountain of peculiar ugliness surmounted by a statue of the Emperor."

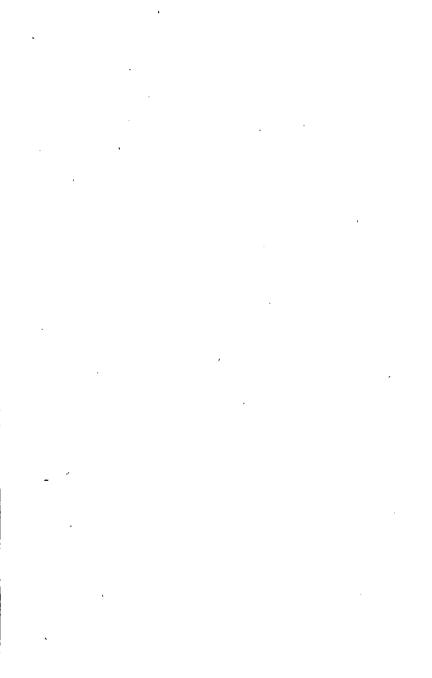
"Is she reading out of 'Murray?'" asked George, without raising his eyes from a letter, which, together with some English newspapers, had been brought in while I was speaking. "I never heard her so concise and unparenthetical before."

"If you're uncivil, George, I'll tell you

no more," I warned him, proceeding, however, the next moment with the enumeration of my recent discoveries. "There's a strange-looking low arch in the 'old town' built entirely of large rough-hewn blocks and without cement. It is said to have been erected by the Moors, and is remarkable for being constructed without a keystone."

- "By Jove! I knew it was 'Murray,'"
  muttered George as before.
- "At the back of the town lies the 'Scoglietto,' a pretty little public promenade thickly planted with shady trees, under which, at intervals, are placed stone benches. Along one side of it flows the stream, from which the town derives its name. This stream overflowed some years back, carrying away bridges and "—
  - "Stop her! Back her!" cried George,





in which an unfeeling proverb declares one no longer a chooser? So don't despise me for it, old fellow—I am sure it is bad enough without that—and just drop me a line and let me know how you are all getting on."

"Poor boy! he might as well have said what he meant," broke in Florence with an arch smile, "to tell me all about Margaret."

"'I think I mentioned in my last," I read on, not heeding her interruption, "'that I had an old friend travelling with me whom I intended bringing down to Fiume and introducing you in persona. He is a thoroughly good fellow, and I'm sure you'll like him, so I have given him a letter to you, knowing that as my friend he is sure of a cordial reception from you. His stay at Fiume will, I believe, be

limited to a few days, for he only takes it en route for Montenegro. By-the-bye, I was forgetting to mention that Mirko Stefanović is a Montenegrin, and, what is stranger still, is proud of it. Let me warn you not to rouse him on this subject, for these people have peculiar notions of fair play, and their belts full of pistols."

- "Good Heavens, George!" cried Florry in alarm, "you're not going to let this man in among the children?"
- "It might be dangerous to offer opposition," answered Gresham drily.
- "'He has travelled over the greater part of the world, and seen more of it in so doing than most men who have gone as far. He has read all sorts of odd books in all manner of strange tongues, but he does not bore you about them at all."

- "How like poor dear Fred Villiers!" laughed Florence.
- "'He is an inveterate politician, and takes an incomprehensible amount of interest in all the *Times* leaders. With the ladies he is a universal favourite.'"
- "Which being interpreted signifieth a coxcomb!" growled my brother-in-law sotto voce.
- "'A universal favourite,' "I read on, repressing a smile, "'for he sings, rhymes, winds worsteds, and schools lap-dogs in the most approved fashion.'"
- "Fred critical and facetious!" laughed Florence merrily.
- "His friend must be a puppy," growled Gresham, "a puppy."
- "George dear!" reproved my sister with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, "I am getting quite over my terror of him, I declare."

Gresham pushed his chair impatiently away from the table and got up and walked to the window.

- "Here's your letter, George, don't you want it?" I asked, holding it out to him.
- "No, thank you," he replied shortly; then after a few minutes' pause, said, turning round with his back to the window, "I suppose I am only in your way here while you're setting things to rights, and may as well go and smoke my weed on the quay?"
- "Yes, dear," said Florence demurely, and, without waiting for more, he left the room.

But the door was barely shut before my sister gave vent to the merriest of peals of laughter.

- "Hush, Flo," I remonstrated, "do take care. He's sure to hear you."
  - "But, Meta, the dear boy is so delight-

fully jealous! As if anyone would look at me, with you there to look at!"

"Don't talk nonsense, Flo," I replied, "and do let us set to work to make the room look a little more habitable, if we can."

The first move was to get the breakfast things taken away—no speedy process in the hands of Kati, our native attendant. The next to get rid of the children, whom I bestowed in George's dressing-room, having first hidden the razors and lucifer matches, and shut the window. Then Flo and I proceeded to take counsel in what way we could best dispose of our humble surroundings so as to make the most of them. Certainly the task did not look encouraging. To begin with, the room had two windows, three doors, and a round German stove in it: how to furnish

this was now the question. There was a high and hideous console surmounted by a discouraging mirror between the windows, which, in a moment of adventurousness, we contrived to have removed from the wall. intending to place it in another part of the room; but we found to our dismay that the Chinamen and women on the wall behind it were fully three shades brighter than their fellows on either side, rejoicing in the most vivid of hues both in feature and raiment, while their twin-brothers and sisters all round the room had assumed an almost Quaker-like sobriety of costume. not to speak of a soft hazy indistinctness of outline, the effect doubtless of time, dust, and frequent scrubbing. This discovery of course necessitated the replacement of the huge structure. The remaining articles of furniture upon which we now turned our attention were not much more encouraging. A large, hard, high sofa, covered with a chintz that had once been red and white, took up almost one entire wall. The width of it, and the fact of all its bolstering being of the pillow-type, and removable at will, had at first somewhat puzzled Florence and myself, but on being hysterically informed by our land-lady of its origin and manifold uses, our doubts and all hope of obtaining its removal fled simultaneously.

- "That, Fraüla," said Maria Paolich, "is a piece of furniture such as there are few now in the world."
- "Thank Heaven!" devoutly muttered poor Florence, gazing at the article in question.
- "It was given me" (sob) "by my husband, buon' anima! when we married,

and I never had it covered since, though it's now thirty years and more, and many's the person has slept on it in the time."

- "Slept on that?" asked Flo, with a slight shudder.
- "Sicuro!" cried its owner, smiling proudly through her tears; "why it makes a beautiful bed. You put the cushions so, and there you are."
- "Meta," will you explain to her we want something to sit on, and not—that thing," cried Florry in despair.
- "But it is a sofa!" answered the undaunted Paolich to all my insinuations; "what better could you want?"

And, as though to give force to the argument, she deposited her stout person suddenly upon it in what can scarcely have been an agreeable manner. There was no more to be said, and though we

could neither admire it for its commodiousness, nor yet revere it as a relic of "fù mio marito, Marco Paolich, buon' anima," it was suffered to remain where we had found it.

The centre of the room was occupied by a heavy square table, of massive proportions, supported at frequent intervals by twin legs of unequal lengths. Flossie's explanation is the only one I can give of this duplicity of support: "that the short ones were resting while the long ones kept it up." It was very high, and deep, possessing a number of odd little drawers. whose chief traits were their inability ever to hold what you wanted to put into them, and the impossibility of replacing them if they once came out. And to crown all, it was covered with one of those thick coarse table-covers so common in Italian lodgings, and whose alternate stripe of green and blue, red and yellow, is so well known to all who have travelled in Italy.

This table took up at least a third of the room; it was just possible to move round it and no more. Opposite the "sofa" stood a nondescript article, for which I am utterly at a loss to find a name. The lower part consisted of a narrow wooden press with wooden doors and a key that didn't belong to them. The upper edifice, and the larger by some inches, contained a series of shelves upon which were displayed a collection of "curiosities," enclosed by glazed doors and further guarded by wire netting. Towards the "sofa," the console, and even the table I had determined to behave with tolerance and forbearance, but from the moment of my arrival I had vowed the expulsion of the "curiosities." Therefore it was, that in the first bitterness of my disappointment about the console, I turned with eagerness towards the laden shelves of the "china-shop," as George called it.

"Come, Flo, we'll begin with this," I cried; "my mind will be more at ease when I have banished these, and I'll be better able to see about the furniture. I'll hand them down to you," I continued, getting upon a chair as I spoke, "and if you'll just lay them on the table, we can have them removed by Kati by-and-bye."

I will not enumerate the chaste and precious contents of those shelves, for the clearance of which my sister and I worked so arduously, only relaxing now and then to comment on this or that "curiosity" as it passed from my hand to hers, and was ranged with its fellows on the table. They

were of the time-honoured lodging-house stamp; the Turk, with a hinge in his neck, whose inside was destined for the reception of lucifer-matches; the three ivory chessmen of Indian manufacture and imperfect preservation, conspicuous for their belts of red sealing-wax, won in the battle with time and natural decay; the Turkish slipper of violet velvet (of a vellowish tendency), embroidered with tarnished gold and white cotton (the pearls having long gone the way of all glass); the petrified sponge with the artificial rose growing out of it—all had their representatives. But conspicuous in the midst of all stood a china teapot, with a little bouquet of lavender stuck in its spout. This and a small white elephant, whose back was stuck full of tooth-picks, seemed to hold the chief places in Maria Paolich's affec-

tions. The latter, she informed me, had been given to her on the birth of her first child, and, though I failed to perceive the analogy, I hastened to express my appreciation of the giver's good taste. The teapot she was less communicative about. though not less affected. "It was a gift, too," she said, and took to flattening her "She had been told it was a perfect specimen of the real antique vessel used in England, wasn't it? or China, for drinking tea out of, and forse la Fraüla had heard of an Assistant-Engineer in the English ship 'Squabla'-- 'Enrico Folcana' by name."

But though I had never heard of Mr. Faulconer of H.M.S. "Squabbler," I was not at a loss to guess his rôle in the drams d'une théière.

"There, it's nearly done now," I said,

"and I am heartily glad of it, for I feel dusty to a degree."

"And look it, too," laughed Florence, though as far as having your hair tumbled goes, I think it becomes you."

"Here, Florence, catch!" I cried, as I prepared to unload an armful of screens, lamp shades, and mats into her lap, when lo! the door opened, and with a merry laugh and a cordial "This way," George entered, followed by Mirko Stefanović.

My first impulse was to drop my load and run for it; my second to descend calmly from my chair, and depositing my treasures on the table, advance to meet the stranger with the unruffled equanimity becoming a British maiden.





# CHAPTER II.

# VILLIERS' FRIEND.



CANNOT recall the exact words in which Mirko Stefanović ad-

dressed Florence on being introduced to her, but of this much I am satisfied—that they were of a purely conventional type, unrelieved even by the faintest foreign accent. His voice, too, was low and well-modulated—calculated in short to allay my sister's fears with regard to his supposed ferocity.

If his words were commonplace, however, his appearance was certainly sufficiently striking, for, though in truth George's inferior in stature, he looked considerably the taller of the two, by virtue of a calm, native dignity of bearing, and the splendour of his picturesque costume. Of this, indeed, my brother-in-law seemed to have an uneasy sense, for no sooner were the introductions accomplished than he hastily drew forward one of the six chintz chairs that adorned our walls, and sat down with a look of relief. I took a place at the other side of the table, while Florence perched herself as well as she could on the big, ugly sofa, motioning our visitor to the vacant seat beside her. In this position, and while Mirko Stefanović was delivering some of the numerous messages with which Villiers had charged him, I had time for a cursory glance at the details of a costume at once so handsome and so uncommon.

It appeared to consist of a sort of white

woollen tunic, the tight sleeves of which were bordered at the wrist by a narrow band of bright-coloured cloth. Over this he wore a short sleeveless jacket of dark green, richly embroidered in gold, and further ornamented down the front with two rows of small gilt buttons placed closely together. This jacket lay open on the breast, displaying a vest of bright crimson velvet similarly laden with embroidery, and the many-coloured silken scarf which encircled his waist, serving the double purpose of pouch and belt; below this again hung the heavy plaited skirt of the tunic.

His small, shapely feet were cased in high leather boots reaching nearly to the knee, over which fell the wide folds of the dark green trouser. His cap was of scarlet cloth—in form not altogether unlike that of the Neapolitan fisherman—bordered with a deep band of dark fur, and terminated by a heavy gold tassel. A brace of handsomely-mounted pistols peeping from the folds of his scarf, and a slightly curved sword in a richly chased scabbard completed his equipment.

Of Mirko Stefanović himself, I find it much more difficult to give an idea than of his costume. He was dark and proudlooking and handsome, yet I cannot describe him. His was one of those faces over which expression chases expression with a rapidity that defies description; beaming one moment with a smile ineffably sweet and winning, and hardening the next with a scornful pride equally repelling; then again as suddenly lighting up with a flash of eager enthusiasm almost boyish in its unrestrained warmth.

"I am charged with a packet for you, Miss Seymour," he said presently, addressing me directly for the first time, and turning his dark eyes full upon me as hedid so. "I can scarcely call it a letter from Villiers; but his anxious injunctions about it have so imbued me with a sense of its importance, that I feared to carry it about me, and have consigned it to the depths of my portmanteau for greater safety. I was on my way to the hotel this morning to fetch it, when I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Gresham, but I shall not fail to deliver it in the course of the afternoon."

Before I could reply, George broke in with a hurried and, what he intended to be, an informal invitation to dinner, adding that he supposed Meta could wait for her letter until then.

"Can't you, Meta?" he asked mischievously.

"Oh! perfectly," I replied with, perhaps, overmuch composure, though I felt the colour rise to my cheeks and temples.

For an instant I felt sure Mirko Stefanović's eyes were fixed upon me in a sort of
calm investigation, but the next, when I
raised my own to his face, I found that he
was looking straight at George, and apparently absorbed in what my brother-inlaw was saying. Shortly after this he rose
and took his leave, promising to be punctual to our early dinner.

"I like him," said Florence, as soon as the sound of his footsteps had died away on the stair. "He is good-looking, and wellmannered, and not a bit of a barbarian."

"Nor a fool," put in George, only half pleased at Flo's eulogium.

- "But what on earth persuaded you to bungle your invitation as you did, George?" continued Florence half in banter, half in earnest.
- "What do you mean?" asked George quickly.
- "I mean that though humility and modesty sit with wonderful grace upon your broad shoulders—considering how seldom they get a ride there—that I object, strongly object, to your proclaiming our dinners uneatable and our company below contempt."
- "Perhaps familiarity, you know, Florry?" replied my brother-in-law with a rather grim smile, and walked out of the room.
- "It's the strangest thing in the world, the change that comes over men when they marry," moralised Flo when we were left alone. "George would no more have said that to me when we were engaged"—

- "But, my dear Flo, he was only jesting,"
  I broke in impatiently.
- "That's all very well, Meta," replied Florence tartly, "but he need not have said it in that way"—
- "Well, if he was angry, he had provocation," I interrupted as before, totally forgetting my previous assertion, and conscious only of the fact that I was angry with something or someone—most probably my sister since she happened to be in the way—at the moment.
- "Oh! yes, of course, you can take it very easy now, Margaret," she said with an indignant toss of her head, "but wait till you are married, and you'll think differently.
- "I have no intention of marrying," I said a little wearily.
- "Now you know that's nonsense, Meta," she cried quickly, forgetting her dignified

grief of the moment before in the angry impatience that now took possession of her, "for sooner or later you are certain to become Fred"—

"Florence!" I exclaimed with a suddenness that made her start, and surprised myself nearly as much, "I may as well tell you once for all what I had intended keeping to myself—for men don't like these subjects to be discussed en famille—Mr. Villiers did me the honour of proposing to me, and I refused him, and, now you know it, I hope you'll leave me alone."

Having concluded which outburst of eloquence, I had nothing left but to burst out crying, which I should probably have done had not the door been suddenly flung wide open, and George appeared bearing Flossie, very red and all dripping, in his arms, exclaiming—

"What could you two be thinking of to leave them together all this time, without anyone to watch them? Look here!" and as he spoke he set down Flossie in the midst of us.

A miserable little spectacle she looked standing with her little fat hands clasped and her hair, all out of curl, dripping on her small fat shoulders.

- "Good gracious! Floss," began Flo, terrified.
- "What has happened, little woman?" I asked more gently, at the same time stretching out my arms to her. She rushed into them.
  - "I—I was a Pagan, Aunt Meta," explained Floss earnestly, "and he wanted me not to be a Pagan, and when I said I would be a Pagan he ducked me in the bath."

I need scarcely say that if anything could restore perfect harmony among us it was the hearty laugh that followed this grave speech of Flossie's. Nor did the joke against Phil for his powers of persuasion in conversion die out amongst us for many a day. My anger, my tears, I forgot them all in the more pressing necessity of crimping Flossie's golden locks afresh, and taking my little niece by the hand I trotted her off to her toilet.

I accordingly took my seat at my dressing table, and, lifting her on to my lap, began to comb out her tangled, dripping hair. It was then, and then only, that accidentally raising my eyes to the looking-glass before me I met the reflection of my own image there, looking dishevelled and untidy it is true, but wonderfully bright

and pretty. I blushed at my own vanity as the thought entered my head, or rather floated before my eyes, but I was conscious of it for all that, and glad of it. My eves looked brighter than usual, my cheeks were slightly flushed with the excitement of my recent scene with my sister, a lock of my hair had escaped its bonds, and hung down untidily and becomingly on my neck—so becomingly that I was almost loth to put it up. For a moment I knew not what I was doing, but sat gazing at my own image with a sort of incredulity not unlike Marguerite's in Faust. even hummed a few bars of the "Jewel Song" beneath my breath, when Flossy's voice recalled me to myself with an astonished exclamation -

"How pooty you are to-day, aunty!"

I started at her voice, and resumed my

work, but it was with a smile, and in more audible tones I continued—

"Ah! s' egli qui fosse Per così vedermi!"

"Oh! Aunt Meta, oo's pulling my hair dedfully," cried my victim.

"Well, there!" I said gaily, releasing her, and not sorry to be alone, "you're smart enough even for a Montene —. Go and show yourself to mamma."

She needed no second bidding, and having opened and shut the door behind her, I felt I had a moment to myself at last. But for what? Not for reflection, not for thought. I felt perfectly incapable of that; besides, what was I to think about? So I went to my wardrobe, and drew out a certain white muslin dress, very fine and gauzy, and prettily trimmed with blue ribands. It was not very fresh,

I had only unpacked it that morning, but I determined to forget that it was slightly crushed, and then doubtless others would not remark it. Then I drew forth a broad blue sash and a tiny blue bow for my hair, and lastly arranged all these on the bed ready to put on. Then someone knocked at the door. I opened it. It was only Kati with a message from Florence that she was dressing, and warned me it was time to think about doing the same. I stood before the girl in the doorway unwilling that even she should see my careful preparations, and, declining all offers of assistance, dismissed her and began my toilet.

It was with an uncomfortable feeling that I entered our little sitting-room a few minutes before four, for I had a sort of dread of Florrie's commenting on the care with which I had dressed myself. And it was with a relief that I am quite hopeless of explaining to my male readers, that I heard her say from the corner of the old sofa where she had again ensconced herself—"Oh! I'm glad you put that on. It looks very pretty."

Then after a pause she added, "I must go and see after Flossy's progress," and left the room.

I sat down by one of the windows, and gazed idly out on so much of the Piazza Adamich below as the high sill would allow me to see in that position. Presently a figure issued from the doorway of the hotel on the right, and made its way towards our house. It was not to be mistaken in its scarlet and gold, its upright bearing, and firm, proud tread; it was Mirko Stefanović. Unconsciously I raised

myself a little to follow him as he approached, and then as suddenly sat down, angry with myself for I knew not what. I heard him coming up the stairs step by step, and then he was shown in. I rose from my seat, and he advanced to meet me, glancing quickly round the room as he did so.

"This is the packet, Miss Seymour," he said, drawing it from the folds of his scarf, and fixing his eyes upon me with a sort of quiet observation in them as he delivered it. "Villiers desired me to beg you to reconsider your reply. Those were his words. He said you would understand his allusion, Miss Seymour," he added, after a short pause, and then again in a half apologetic tone, "Fred and I are very old friends."

"Mr. Villiers is very enigmatical," I

said dryly, "and has far too good an opinion of my powers of divination."

He merely bowed; and just then Florence came in, followed by George and the children, and further strengthened in the rear by Paolich fils with the soup tureen.

The dinner went off creditably enough. The material part of it did not prove uneatable, and conversationally it was decidedly the reverse of contemptible. Without saying anything extraordinarily witty, Mirko Stefanović had the yet more uncommon merit of talking with uniform agreeability. He seemed to possess something more than mere superficial knowledge of the topics of general interest at the time, and had, moreover, the tact of knowing when each of them had been sufficiently dwelt upon. From subject to

subject he passed, dealing with each in a different mood, now gravely arguing on the matter in sober earnest, and then suddenly dismissing it with a light jest and a merry laugh; and throughout there was a charm in his voice and manner that attracted us all to our strange guest almost without our knowledge. George talked with an animation he had not displayed since we left home two years before—he talked even cleverly, I thought.

Florence listened, joining occasionally in the conversation with a bright look of interest in her eye. Phil sat silent by with an unspoken declaration in his wide open eyes that to be like this was the height of his ambition; while Flossy, less interested in the words than attracted by the looks and manner of our guest, quickly left my side, and established herself at his elbow with her big blue eyes fixed upon him in calm speculative contemplation. It was in vain that her father quizzed and her mother frowned at her; in vain that I wooed her back to her post whence she had slipped unnoticed. She gave us a quiet grave glance all round, which changed to a look of triumph when, passing his arm round her little fat waist, Mirko Stefanović begged that she might be suffered to remain.

We sat a long time round the table when the dessert had been left upon it, for we had nowhere to go to, and indeed did not care to interrupt the conversation; at last George suggested Flo and I should put something on our heads, and that we should all go and take our coffee al fresco at the little café below in the square.

"For the sun will soon have gone

down," he said, "and then we can take a stroll by the sea."

We accordingly went, and sat on droll little high chairs round a little round table with a gritty marble top, from which the polish had long been washed and worn away: with the quaint little piazza on three sides of us, and the deep blue Adriatic lying on the fourth. First a couple of ragged children and an old idiot woman stopped to look at us, and stayed to beg. Then on being dismissed with kreutzers. they further proceeded to bless us in an inconveniently demonstrative manner. In a short time a small crowd had collected around us, and in about half an hour from fifty to sixty people were standing round us in a ring; some critical, some supplicating, and all inquisitive. The only deliverance was in a retreat, which we effected by quietly walking away through their midst, the people falling civilly back to make way for us.

George had given me his arm, and led the way with the sort of defiant aggressiveness an Englishman invariably thinks himself bound to display. Mirko Stefanović followed us, leading Flossy by the hand and with Florence on his arm, talking to her, and glancing at the crowd with a look that betrayed neither anger nor surprise.

"See how the cowardly brutes fall back when they see one won't stand nonsense," cried George exultingly, while at the same moment I heard Mirko Stefanović's soft distinct tones, saying —

"Oh, yes, they are civil enough if one-takes them quietly."



## CHAPTER III.

## MIDNIGHT REFLECTIONS.

T was only on returning from our

was reminded of Villiers' letter by seeing it lying on the console in our little sitting-room, where I had carelessly tossed it when we sat down to dinner. And with the inexplicable perversity of human nature—or woman's nature, if you will—I snatched it up impatiently, seized with a sudden curiosity to learn its contents; whereas for the last four hours it had lain there unheeded, forgotten, as far from my thoughts as was he who had written it. But ere I had broken the seal, I had changed my

mind. No, I must open it neither there nor then, but wait patiently until tea was over, and I could go and read it quietly in my room, where Florence could look neither questioning nor compassionate, and where George could not worry me with sly glances and knowing nods. I looked quickly round as I made this determination, to see if anyone had observed me. But no. George was sitting at the tea table with his elbows upon it, and his head resting on his hands, while his eyes were fixed upon the steaming little Somovar opposite, and there was no one else in the room.

"Is tea made, Meta?" asked Florence at the moment. "This little woman here has already been up too late, and must be got to bed as soon as possible."

"I not seepy," declared Flossy with her

eyes opened to their full extent, creeping to my side as I poured out the tea.

- "Did I hear you inviting Mirko Stefanović to dinner for to-morrow again, George?" asked Florence after a few minutes' silence.
- "Yes. Have you any objection? I thought you'd be delighted," said George half gruffly.
- "And so we are, aren't we, Meta?" replied Florence with a little laugh. "That is," she added, "if he is coming."
  - "Oh! yes, he's coming."
- "By-the-bye, he never brought you Fred's letter, did be, Meta?" asked George after a short pause.

Florence looked up quickly at this question, and I know not what prompted me to it, but readily and unhesitatingly I replied—

- " No."
- "How odd," said George carelessly.
- "I suppose he'll bring it to-morrow."
  - "Probably," I said as before.
- "You seem to be pretty easy as to its contents," remarked George with a little laugh; "perhaps you know them already?"
- "Possibly," replied I, growing somewhat weary of this questioning.
- "When does Stefanović leave?" asked Florence by way of rescuing me.
  - " Next week," was the curt reply.

Poor Flo had hit on an unfortunate expedient in her desire to help me.

I know not exactly why, but our party round the tea table that night was not a cheerful one. The children were tired and sleepy; George was inclined to be cross; Florence was trying not to show any instinctive knowledge of the jealous tirade the poor girl saw impending; and I, who was generally the one to restore harmony on such occasions, sat by, silent and preoccupied, with my head full of all sorts of incoherent fancies which I could not have put into words if even I had wished it.

It was a relief to me when the sound of the clock striking half-past ten broke in on my reverie, and reminded me of the fact that Flossy was actually falling asleep where she sat, in spite of the bravest attempts at wakefulness. So I rose, and, wishing my sister and brother-in-law goodnight, bore my still feebly protesting niece to her room.

Nor did I leave her until she had fallen asleep, for she was tired and therefore hard to please, and so I sat down by her little bed, and sang softly to her as she lay, with the eagerness growing stronger every moment in my heart to tear open and read the letter, I clutched nervously in my pocket. At last she slept. It seemed to me as though ages had elapsed between my return to the house from our moonlit stroll, and now; and yet as I entered my room and closed the door behind me, the cracked bell of San Vito told out eleven strokes.

Now that I was secure from interruption a sort of lull came to my eager curiosity of the moment before, and it was only after methodically laying aside the dress and ribands I had worn, that I sat down at my dressing-table and prepared to read Villiers' letter. Even as I broke the seal, I paused to listen to the footsteps of some passer-by; for the streets are silent in Fiume at night.

Finally I opened my letter. It was very long, consisting of seven closelywritten sheets, and as I counted these with something of curiosity and something of dismay, too, in the task before me, something fell out on the floor. It was a photograph, and, I confess, I could not refrain from an amused laugh as I looked at it by the dim light. Even in glancing over the pages before me as I unfolded them one by one, I had gleaned enough to satisfy me that Fred's letter possessed some passages at least of the most highflown and lover-like description; while his portrait represented him in as unpoetic a light as possible, picturing him in one of those composite costumes in which young Englishmen are wont to indulge abroad, consisting of a travelling suit of dark grey with large cross bars upon it (giving him

the aspect of being in prison from the head down), and a tall Tyrolese hat with a cock's feather in the side of it, of the defiant signification of which, the chances are, he had not the remotest conception.

I will not weary my reader with a perusal of Villiers' letter. It was conceived in the best feelings and warmest affection of the poor fellow's good heart; but conveyed in such sadly incoherent and contradictory sentences that I doubt whether anyone but myself could have unravelled his meaning. I knew what he meant; had not I heard it all before?—therefore the haziness that pervaded all his declarations did not prevail to baffle me.

I believe no woman can read a love letter addressed to herself without experiencing some emotion, even though she may not care for its writer. Men say it

arises from gratified vanity, women dignify it by the name of pity: I know not which is the correct reading, if either—I only know I felt it.

'When I had opened that letter it had been with a spirit of sarcasm and mockery: when I folded it up, it was with a sigh. I was sorry for him that he should have staked his happiness upon that which was unattainable, and sorry for myself that whereas an honest heart was offering me such unmerited devotion I could not bring myself to accept the gift.

"I know I'm not worthy of you, dearest Meta," he wrote, after addressing me as Miss Seymour in the first calmer sentences. "But oh! perhaps I might become so, if you would only give me a chance," which he intended to mean "if I would marry him."

From this he soared into a sort of. poetical frenzy, apostrophizing me as the apple of his eye, the star of his fate, the lady of his dreams, and so on; subsiding suddenly back into prose with a hint as to Mrs. Travers's intentions. Then, with a taste for horror that I had never before suspected in Villiers, he drew a picture of himself if rejected by me; he would offend Mrs. Travers, make over what little he possessed to the foundling hospital, a crossing-sweeper, or the correspondent of a penny paper, or something equally degrading, and I should never hear of him again until—

Gracious Heavens! what was that? Something had moved behind me—I heard the rustle of a dress—and as I raised my startled eyes to the looking-glass my eye caught a white object just disappearing in

the corner of the room. With a halfsuppressed scream, I rose, and looked cautiously around. There in the corner lay a little heap of white, but it turned out to be nothing more mysterious than my muslin dressing-gown, blown off its peg by the cool night breeze that floated in at the open window. I picked it up, and drew it round me as the best mode of dispelling a sort of feeling of nervousness which even so trifling an incident can cause at night to a mind already excited, and folded up the letter, and locked it away preparatory to going to bed, when again the sound of a footstep in the lonely street made me pause, and drew me this time to the window. The lamps were dim and few that shed their flickering rays on the deserted street, and their feeble radiance sufficed only to mark the outline of the solitary figure that with a firm, leisurely tread was advancing towards the Piazza Adamich. Presently he began to hum, a common enough habit in foreign—chiefly Italian—streets at night, and in a few minutes began in a low, clear voice of great sweetness and beauty the tenor part of the beautiful duet in Gounod's Faust—

Dammi ancor contemplar il tuo viso.

I stood entranced. I did not move. I scarcely breathed as I listened to those clear mellow tones, and when he drew nigh to the soprano part, it was all I could do to restrain a wild impulse to supply the missing voice and break into Margherita's faltering rejoinder, "O Silenzio, O mister!" when he halted abruptly, and, striking a match, seemed intent for a few minutes on the business of lighting a

cigar. Then wheeling round he retraced his steps down the street till the bend in it hid him from view. I waited some little time in case he should return, but at length growing weary of gazing at the blinking lamps scattered at rare intervals along the silent street and listening to the lapping sound of the sea, I lay down and soon fell into a heavy sleep.

When I awoke, it was to find my little niece standing by my bedside with rather a rueful expression on her countenance. Her hat, too, which she had put on at the back of her head, denoted a degree of aggravation fully borne out by her tone as she said —

"I didn't want to wake oo, Aunt Meta, but oo promised oo'd walk out wit me and it's ever so late!"

"So it is, darling," I cried penitently,

and glancing at the hand of my watch which was close on seven. "But run away to Agnes, and I'll be with you in a few minutes."

I was as good as my word, and in a very short time Floss and I were treading our way along the sunlit streets. I fear poor Floss found me but a sorry companion during that morning's walk, for do what I would, and I tried hard indeed, I could not keep my mind from wandering from her merry little prattle away into clouds of vague speculation.

Passages from poor Fred's letter kept recurring to my mind with distressing pertinacity. The soft cadences of the voice I had heard in the night echoed again in my ear, clear and distinct as when uttered. Anxiety was at my heart on Florrie's account, too, for I felt instinc-

tively that George was jealous of our yesterday's guest, and Gresham jealous was a man insane. And with all this mingled a curiosity concerning Mirko Stefanović, for the existence of which I could not account to myself. Then came vet another doubt embarrassing and disturbing me. What if Gresham were to mention Fred's letter to Mirko Stefanović, and allude to my not having received it? It would put me in a horribly false position, and entail a number of unpleasant explanations. But I had not thought of this when I replied in the negative to George's enquiry. I had thought of nothing just then but how to escape his questions and my sister's glances; and now what was to be done? In vain I endeavoured to discover some means of evading the difficulty; I must either meet

and brave it out, or-and I blushed as I thought of the alternative. I could not return, and say "I mistook," or "I told you an untruth about the letter last night." Nor was my second plan of telling Florence the truth, and letting her explain it to her husband more feasible, for, to own the deception was to admit there was something to disguise, and I wished of all things to make them understand there was nothing between Villiers and myself. A childish idea of dropping the envelope in George's way by accident, and letting it tell its own story, flashed through my mind for an instant, but was dismissed the next: for had not it all the disadvantages of the previous plan, besides being undignified? and, above all, would it not replenish George's store of jokes ad infinitum, should he think he had made a

discovery? No, all these plans were unfeasible, and I bit my lip impatiently as I bethought me of the last alternative.

"If I could say one word to Mirko Stefanović," I thought, "I'm sure he would not betray my folly. He's Fred's dear friend, too," I continued in a feeble attempt to excuse such an act in my own eyes. Then again I blushed, remembering that this man of whom I was going to make a sort of confidant was an acquaintance of yesterday—a stranger until twenty-four hours ago—and with a little stamp of my foot as I walked, I determined to be silent and wait the chances of the day.

If I was surprised at first at my niece's ready compliance with my proposal to turn our steps homewards, I soon discovered the cause of her unwonted tractability,

for, with a child's natural intolerance of abstraction, she was now as silent and reserved towards me as she had before been petulant and exacting.

"A penny for your thoughts, Floss," I said, smiling at her little firmly compressed mouth, roused by her silence as I had not been by her chatter.

"I was only thinking," said she with dignity.

"But what of, pet?"

"Of oo and the birds," replied she calmly.

"Of me and the birds? What about us, Floss?" I asked astonished.

"Why, when I said one sang so very well, oo said he had the sweetest tenor voice oo ever heard, and "—

"You must have misunderstood me, dear," I interrupted her hurriedly, the

sense of my own injustice crimsoning my cheek. "How could I say such non-sense? But here we are at home. Run up quickly and get your hat off; they're sure to be waiting breakfast for us."





## CHAPTER IV.

"why not for you, miss seymour?"

HO does not know the pale, spiritless smile—like the sunshine of a rainy day—and the intense amiability of tone and manner that two people who have quarrelled and made friends are wont to adopt to one another in fulfilment, as it were, of their reciprocal promise "to think no more about it?" And who has not felt, while contemplating this process, that it was about the last means in the world likely to promote the end in view?

Such was my conviction as I took my place between my sister and George at the

breakfast table. My brother-in-law held a newspaper in his hand, from which he was reading sundry scraps of intelligence to which Florence was listening with the strained attention of one who desires to please rather than be pleased.

- "You're late, Meta," he said, with almost a sigh of relief as I entered.
- "Yes, I know, and I am sorry to have kept you waiting. What, is the post in? Any letters for me?"
- "No, but there's one in Villiers' hand for that friend of his," replied George with a shadow of displeasure in his face; "though why addressed to my care, I am at a loss to say."

Florence gave me a quick glance, and then went on with her breakfast, and nothing more was said on this subject during the remainder of the meal. "Oh! George," I said innocently, as he presently rose and walked to the window; "if you are going out, would you take the children with you? Floss can show you the way to the Scoglietto, I'm sure; can't you, little woman? And you're all three dreadfully in our way here while we resume our interrupted labours of yesterday."

Gresham laughed good-humouredly at my speech, and consented to the arrangement, and ere he could have time to change his mind, I had clapped on Flossy's hat and sent them off.

"Now say that was not a master stroke of diplomacy!" I laughed as I looked out of the window to see that my scheme had really succeeded.

Florence looked up at me with her great placid blue eyes as though not quite understanding me. "Here have I persuaded George that he was most anxious to walk out en pater-familias, and obtained for you a temporary release from the constraint of his presence this morning, and all with the most subtle arts, and behold! I get no thanks."

Florence smiled, and then two big tears came into her eyes and shone there an instant ere they fell heavily down, unheeded on her hand.

- "Florence, tell me what is the matter; surely you can trust me to help you, if I can," I whispered eagerly, coming close to where she sat.
- "It is about Villiers' friend," she answered hesitatingly; and then little by little she told me all.
- "And all because he offered you his arm to come through the crowd? How ridiculous!" I exclaimed impatiently.

- "Yes, but, dear, men are like that when they marry," she said, now sufficiently pacified to return to platitudes.
- "Can I do anything to shield you from more of this absurd jealousy?" I asked her.
- "Well, as to the absurdity of it," she replied a little coldly, "I confess I do not"—
- "Well, this natural jealousy, Florence, whatever you like to call it," I said somewhat impatiently.
- "If you could attract more of his conversation to yourself perhaps"—
- "I can try," I answered, turning away my head to hide the smile I could not refrain from.
- "If you could manage, perhaps, to make him walk beside you this evening, dear," she went on.
  - "It might be possible."

"If he should pay you any special attention, you see, Meta, that would make George easy at once."

## "T see."

We spoke no more on the subject after this, but went to work once more to make our little sitting-room less bare-looking and uncomfortable. I managed to get some bright-coloured flowers to put in the vases on the console; I coaxed two quaint square arm-chairs out of Maria Paolich, and persuaded her to consent to the removal of the glass doors from the china-shop—the shelves of which I filled with sundry books, boxes, and knick-knacks of our own; and lastly (and this was by far my greatest achievement) I obtained the removal of the big square table and the substitution of a round one of smaller dimensions, though of the same height.

This we covered with a cashmere shawl of Florrie's, and littered with our embroidery and such magazines as had been brought with us, or had come by that morning's post; while, in one of the windows, I inserted my own dressing-table, having first divested it of its pink and white petticoats, and covered it with a sober green cloth, and furnished it with writing materials.

"Hulloa! Meta. Well, this is a transformation," cried my brother-in-law gaily, as he stood in the doorway. "You are always handy at this sort of thing, but this time you've outdone yourself. Now if Fred had been coming I could have understood it, but"—

"Look here, George, I declare I'll fine yeu for every time you mention Fred's name to me," I cried with pretended emportement, "and charge you so much a head on every person who hears you pronounce it."

"You'd better let him off his past offences, Meta," laughed Florence, "or there won't be enough left for the house expenses."

"Don't you think you'd better tell George about Fred, or let me tell him?" asked my sister of me timidly, when we were alone together towards dinner time.

"No. Why?" I asked.

"Oh! I don't know, only it seems unfair to keep him in the dark about it," she said, adding uneasily after a pause, giving me a quick glance with her great blue eyes, "he seems to wish it so much, you know."

"I don't see any necessity, I confess,

Florence," I replied quietly. "I only told you because—I was in a passion, I think."

"I don't want to force any confidences from you, of course, dear Meta," she continued nervously, "but when he asks me, I don't know what to say."

"Naturally," I assented, with a sort of mischievous delight in poor Flo's perplexities.

"But it might be better that—that I should be in a position to inform him," she suggested hesitatingly, "if—that is, when—I mean—should you have positively made up your mind to refuse him."

"I thought I told you yesterday," I began with an irresistible temptation to amuse myself at Florrie's expense.

"Yes, dear, if you were quite sure of your mind upon the subject; but I thought the fact of his writing"—

- "You forget I've not had that letter."
- "To be sure," she said with a half suspicious glance at me, "but of course you can guess its contents, and I fancied that might influence you, but if you are quite determined"—
  - "I was."
  - "What do you mean, Meta?"
- "Simply that I had no doubts whatever as to my reply until you suggested one now," I replied, for the pure sake of puzzling her.
- "And now you are inclined to revoke your refusal?" she began, breathless with astonishment and gratification.
- "If you think so, you would do wisely to leave well alone," I laughed, and rising from my seat began to busy myself with some flowers for the dinner-table.
- "I must look for Flossy," she said, after a few moment's pause, and left the

room, when I heard her knock softly at George's room door, and, being summoned to enter, open it gently and close it again behind her.

I could not help laughing to myself as I fancied Florence's solemn recapitulation of our recent conversation and Gresham's ready belief in her view of the matter. I could frame for myself the very arguments she was using to prove the success of their cherished plan, and the earnest advice she was giving him not to "tease" me—I was sure she would use that word any more on the subject; I could almost fancy I heard her whispered words and saw her eager looks as I sat there alone, smiling at my own handiwork, and wondering what had prompted me to undo in the last half hour all I had been trying to achieve for months past.

"It is very absurd," I told myself, "but for the last four-and-twenty hours I've been doing all sorts of unaccountable things independently of myself, as it were."

Just then the door opened, and Mirko Stefanović came in. I had not heard his approach, and the suddenness of his entrance and interruption to my thoughts startled me and set my heart beating.

- "I fear I came in too abruptly," he said, looking inquiringly at me after we had interchanged greetings. "I startled you."
- "No—yes, rather," I muttered. "I was thinking, and "—— I stopped.
- "And I broke off your reflections?" he concluded for me. "I beg your pardon, if they were of a pleasant sort, as doubtless they were."
  - "Why doubtless?" I asked, looking up

at him quickly, struck by the tone of half nquiry in which his last words were spoken.

"Nay, is it not reasonable to conclude so?" he replied lightly.

"As it happened, however, my thoughts were not pleasant," I went on hurriedly, drifting again into one of those follies I had but lately been condemning. "I was thinking of the annoyance one sometimes entails upon one's self by a foolish word half unconsciously uttered."

"An admission, for instance," he said with a peculiar smile, "or a denial."

"Exactly," I said, impelled on to the avowal in spite of that morning's prudent resolutions. "They are such little troubles, and yet"—

"Would I dare offer you my humble services, Miss Seymour," said Mirko Stefanović with graceful deference. "May I ask you a favour?" I said eagerly. "You will think it very odd, but I shall explain—I shall try to explain it to you some day."

"Pray tell me how I can serve you?" he asked readily.

"Only by not mentioning that letter you brought me yesterday to my brother-in-law or my sister," I replied hurriedly with a crimson blush.

He merely bowed his head with a low deferential bow in reply to my request, and rose to meet Florence, who now entered.

That day our party round the dinnertable was a little more constrained than on the previous one. Our guest alone was easy, pleasant and entertaining as on the day before. George was surreptitiously watching Florence; my sister was studiously endeavouring to avoid all occasion of blame. I myself had an uneasy consciousness of my foolish conduct and the odd constructions that might well be put upon it, and a sort of anxiety as to what new folly I might yet do in my present inexplicable mood.

After dinner we again adjourned to the little café in the Piazza below, and when the sun sank sufficiently low we again made our way through the little throng of inquisitive natives—much less numerous this evening, fortunately—and took our way towards the Abbazzia road. But not in our order of last night, for, when starting, Florence had slipped her arm within George's, and moved on in front, leaving me to follow with Mirko Stefanović and the children. For some time he addressed himself chiefly to Philip, who,

with a boy's ardent admiration for valour and daring, listened to Stevanović's tales of danger and adventure with breathless interest and attention, asking about those far countries in which our guest had travelled, and the wild sports in which he had taken part. It had been some chance allusion of Gresham's to the boar-hunting in the Maremma that had led to this conversation, and I caught up some of the speaker's enthusiasm as he graphically described some fearful encounter with a tiger, or a wild desperate flight from a pursuing boar. Nor was this stated in boastfulness, for never did he relate these incidents as happening to himself, describing himself generally as only an eyewitness, though the thrilling truthfulness of every detail betrayed him more than once to have been the hero.

"Look, Aunt Meta, isn't he like the Prince of Camaralzaman?" whispered Flossy admiringly.

"Hush darling," I whispered, but could not help smiling at her words.

It was true: his finely-chiselled features all quivering with the excitement of the topic he was discussing, his large dark eyes flashing with a fierce, bright light, the clear olive-tinted complexion and wavy silken hair of jetty black, all recalled an illustration in a little old edition of the "Arabian Nights" we had at home, which she had often looked at with deepest admiration.

A short pause occurred in the conversation, and then some trifling remark of mine as to the effects of light and shade on the hills before us drew our conversation into a different channel. "How came you to pitch on Fiume for your summer residence?" asked Stefanovic, adding with a laugh, "I believe it is not what is called a fashionable watering-place."

"The very reverse," I said, "and it was just the fact of its being so totally unfrequented that led my brother-in-law to select it, and made my sister and myself so ready to concur in his choice."

"It is strange that he should even have known it. I, who know all this part of the world so long and so intimately, confess I never remembered so much as its existence until Villiers mentioned it the other day. You remain here all the summer?"

"Yes, most probably until the end of September, when we return to Pesth, where my brother-in-law is engaged in business."

Then followed some remarks upon Pesth

and the society of that city, in the course of which we discovered that we were both acquainted with each other's friends.

"I say, Meta," said Gresham, suddenly stopping and turning round, "did you ever see anything more beautiful than the sharp shadow that mountain throws on the sea there? It's a splendid effect!"

"It is beautiful," we owned, stopping in our turn as the others moved on.

"I like the sea enclosed like this so much better than a wide unbounded expanse of waves and sky."

"Do you?" he asked. "I, on the contrary, would wish those enclosing isles away, and to see the long line of the horizon stretching beyond them; it gives a greater notion of vastness and grandeur to my mind to see what you call 'the unbounded expanse of waves and sky."

- "WHY NOT FOR YOU, MISS SEYMOUR?" 81
- "But that very grandeur awes and chills me—it gives me a sort of feeling of lone-liness and shelterlessness which I don't feel here with these friendly green hills round me."
- "And I feel imprisoned and constrained amongst them," he replied smiling.
  - "Mein Herz gleicht ganz dem Meere Hat Sturm und Ebb'und Fluth Und manche schoene Perle In seiner Tiefe ruht."
- "How beautifully those words are set to music," I remarked.
- "Yes. Do you sing, Miss Seymour?" he asked suddenly.
- "Yes, but my voice is by no means strong, and I am so nervous about it. But I delight in music."
- "So do I. I trust you will let me have the pleasure of hearing you ere I leave Finne?"

- "Alas! we have no piano!" I exclaimed mournfully.
- "Could not we find one somewhere? There must be one at the Casino."
- "Oh! yes, there is, for I hear it almost every evening, and it awakens all sorts of envious feelings in my heart." I laughed. "A propos," I added, "would you believe
- it? I was serenaded last night."
  - "Ah! indeed."
- "Yes, somebody with a tenor voice of great beauty walked up and down the street late into the night singing."

He turned his dark eyes full upon me for an instant, and then with a little laugh said —

- "How odd! And what was this person like in appearance?"
- "I cannot tell, for he kept in the shadow of the houses, and never emerged

into the moonlight on the Piazza. His tread was peculiar; but indeed all footsteps sound so much more firm and distinct at night."

- "Quite mysterious," he laughed again.
- "But, unfortunately, I fear that if I am to be frank I must own I can hardly lay claim to the serenade, for, if *l'inconnu* sang for anyone's pleasure but his own, it must have been some inhabitant of one of those houses under the shadow of which he paced so patiently, and not for me."

"And why not for you, Miss Seymour?" he asked, in a low, quiet tone, and again fixing his eyes upon me.

But before I could reply, Florence turned round, and said—

"It is time Flossy were at home, Meta dear, and I think we had best take her there, leaving ces messieurs to the enjoy-

ment of their cigars, and free to join us at tea at their own good pleasure."

"You are very kind, Mrs. Gresham," said Stefanović with one of his low, graceful bows, "but I have an engagement this evening, and must deny myself the pleasure of joining you at tea."

"Ill just take a couple of turns on the pier, and then join you," called out George as we separated; he to smoke his cigar and we to enter the house.

But Stefanović accompanied us to the very door, and only left us when young Paolich appeared to light us up the stairs, with a succession of lucifer matches. He bid Florence good-night, taking her proffered hand with truly British heartiness, and then as she turned to mount the stairs, guiding cross, sleepy Flossy in front of her, he took my hand in his, and raised it to his lips. I started a little, for the

"Dear me! the idea of these barbarians not lighting their staircases," complained Florence as she groped her way up by the fitful momentary gleams of light thrown by each successive match as it was struck on the wall in passing.

"Yes," I assented eagerly, as, breathless and flushed, I gained her side before she could miss me. "It is decidedly a disadvantage;" though in my heart I rejoiced at the shielding darkness, and only wished it might last until my cheeks had cooled again.

"Disadvantage," she exclaimed, "it's downright dangerous! I shall go straight to Flossy's room, Meta—take care! there's a step there—if you'll go and make tea meanwhile."



## CHAPTER V.

GRESHAM'S CONVICTIONS.

on us on the morning following the incident related in the last chapter, but we all happened to be from home at the moment, and, contrary to my expectation, he did not join us in our evening promenade. On the next day as we sat down to dinner a note was put into George's hand which had just been brought over from the hotel. It could be but from Mirko Stefanović, and I felt an unaccountable chill pass over me as the thought flashed across me that it might announce his departure—

perhaps contain his adieux. But my mind was soon set at rest when, after carelessly glancing over it, Gresham handed it to me. It was written in a pretty delicate handwriting more like a woman's than a man's, and consisted of a very few lines. writer opened with an expression of regret at not having been so fortunate as to find us at home yesterday, and his inability to call to-day, being (as he expressed it) overwhelmed with business. He then proceeded to say that a Greek friend of his, at present President of the Casino, had deputed him to beg Mr. and Mrs. Gresham and Miss Seymour to consider themselves welcome guests at the Casino as long as they resided at Fiume. The reading-room contained but few attractions beyond one or two German newspapers and a local journal in doubtful Italian; but the piano,

which had once been good, was always at the ladies' disposal. And then with the usual conventionalities the letter closed. Nothing could be more simple than the wording, or more common-place than the matter of this note, and yet it made me happier than I dared confess.

"It is very civil of the President," remarked Florence. "Do you intend to avail yourself of the invitation?"

"Oh! I don't care about it myself, but if you and Meta like the liberty of the piano, I see no objection to it."

And thus the discussion ended.

On the following morning as Gresham took his hat and cigar-case, and was about to sally forth for his usual matutinal smoke, Florence timidly laid her hand on his arm to detain him as he had gained the door, and said hesitatingly —

- "Oh! by-the-bye, George, would not it be well to leave your card on—on—the President of the Casino?"
- "But where am I to find him? I don't even know his name," he said.
- "Oh! they would tell you anywhere," I said listlessly, "at the Casino itself, at the hotel"—
- "Well, I'll see about it," he said, and closed the door, without hearing Florrie's rejoinder, fortunately, or it might have seriously altered his course of action and ruined the success of my scheme.
- "And you could call on Stefanović at the same time," she had suggested, adding as the door closed, "For I'm sure he has managed the whole matter."
- "I'd advise you not to tell George so," I replied with simulated carelessness, "or we'll have him jealous again."

And then we sat silent, Florrie embroidering and I holding a book. But I could not read. I kept thinking over that strange act of his the other night, and glorying in the thought that this invitation to the Casino was of his procuring and on my account, and wondering what could be the business that detained him at Fiume. What could it be? And then I became conscious of Florence's looking at me, and turned over two pages in my trepidation.

- "What are you reading?" she inquired.
- "Oh! an article on the management of silkworms in *Once a Week*," I replied, glancing eagerly back at the title. "Why?"
- "Because you got quite pink with a sort of a pale blush, and smiled just now," she answered.

"Very strange," I observed, and turned over two more leaves in my desperate anxiety to be at ease.

It was not until we were seated at dinner that I learnt the success of the morning's diplomacy.

"I did not call on the President, Florence," said George, "for I happened to meet him at Stefanović's, where I went to learn his whereabouts."

- "Oh! indeed," remarked Florrie.
- "Yes, it's that old Greek merchant, you know—what's the fellow's name?—who owns two-thirds of everything in this place, I believe;" then turning to me, impatient at his wife's want of memory, "What's the name of the big house like a factory on the left of the street as you go down the Corso?"
  - "Casa Perdicaris!"

"Perdicaris, that's it," he repeated, "and this old man is the owner of it. He's in rags' and 'corn,' and I don't know what besides, and as rich as Crossus."

"But how do he and Mirko Stefanovič happen to be acquainted, I wonder," mused Florence.

"Oh! there's nothing very strange in that," replied Gresham. "A man that has travelled half over the world, like Stefanović, is almost sure to find acquaintances turn up at all sorts of odd places. But," he added, with a knowing smile, "I think I can guess the manner of business which is detaining him here, and which, if I am not much mistaken, brought him to Fiume in the first instance."

"Indeed!" inquired Florrie, "and what is it?"

- "Well, of course, I may be wrong," he admitted this possibility with admirable modesty, "but I strongly suspect Stefanović is devilishly hard up, and Perdicaris happens to have an only daughter to whom he naturally intends to leave all his fortune"—
- "But, George dear, do you think him capable of such a thing?" cried my sister, looking really distressed.
- "What! of marrying a pretty little girl with a pot of money?" laughed George. "Well, I confess I do."
- "But of coming down here with the intention of marrying the poor child for her fortune!" exclaimed Florence.
  - "That may or may not be," pronounced George with the calm conceit of one who has made a discovery, or thinks he has made one. "But you see, Flo, two-thirds

of these Montenegrin fellows are adventurers—simply adventurers—and what prevents our friend Mirko Stefanović from belonging to "—

"You forget, George," I broke in, trying to still the beating of my heart, and to steady my trembling voice, "Fred Villiers is not likely to make an adventurer his friend, and still less likely to introduce him as such into this household."

I laid the emphasis unconsciously on the concluding words, and they had more effect on George than would have had volumes of argument.

"Oh! yes, I forgot," he admitted in an uncertain, disconcerted way. "But it does not prove he's a good fellow, that he happens to know one of the best breathing."

"But, George," said Florence quietly,

and with an unconscious tact I blessed her for, "how is it you think old Perdicaris would give his daughter to Stefanović, and he so poor?"

"Perdicaris is very wealthy, but he's only a merchant after all," explained George; "whereas Stefanović is not only of a good family, but has got a chance, it appears, of succeeding to the Principality of Montenegro, being distantly related to the present Prince, and, if Perdicaris is to be believed, in a conspiracy to have him assassinated."

"You don't mean Perdicaris told you that," cried Florence horrified.

"Well, he hinted as much when we left the hotel together," laughed George carelessly.

"Any way, that proves him no adventurer," I could not help saying.

"I don't see the point of your argument, Meta," he laughed. "What is a Prince of Montenegro better than a Chief of Banditti?"

What was Stefanović to me, I asked myself when alone in my room after the above conversation. What was he to me that I should resent every word that was spoken against him, and feel such an agony of fear come over my heart as I heard of the mere possibility of his marriage with this girl? It was possible, nay even probable, I told myself; George had said she was pretty. And unconsciously I glanced at my own pale, anxious face in the glass. Aye! she was pretty and rich. Oh! yes, he would marry her, surely, certainly, I repeated to myself; she was pretty and rich—and I! But what was it to me? It could be nothing, nothingbut then, oh! why did he kiss my hand so tenderly that night? Then again I smiled scornfully at my own folly. What? Was I fool enough to fancy there was any deeper meaning in that simple act of homage—it occurred every day in Austria, and meant nothing, absolutely nothing. And then I caught the reflection of myself with the hard forced smile still on my lips, and, with a little smothered cry, fell into a violent fit of tears.

That evening I had a headache, and did not accompany Florence and George to the Casino, where they went for a short time in accordance with Gresham's promise to Perdicaris in the morning. Florence came into my room when they returned, to ask me how I was. I had wrapped a muslin dressing-gown round me, and was sitting at my bedroom window, looking at the moon-

lit sea. The cool night air had refreshed my burning forehead, and I felt that sort of listlessness—half sad, half pleasant—that generally succeeds strong emotions in the young, when hope is only bruised, not dead.

"You won't have tea? Then go to bed, dearest, won't you?" said Florence gently. "I wish you had been there, Meta, for Monsieur Perdicaris, his wife and daughter were there—such a lovely girl she is, and so anxious to know you. And Stefanović was also at the Casino, and made George quite cross again by not leaving my side the whole evening."

"Indeed!" I said indifferently, though my heart bounded at her words.

"Yes, and he's coming to dinner tomorrow, and you're to go and sing for them at the Casino—some German song or other."

- "'Das schoene Fischermaedchen?'" I asked eagerly.
- "Yes, that's it; but there, you're getting quite feverish with my chatter. Goodnight," and she left me.

I smiled to myself as the door closed behind her. Yes, I would go to bed now and sleep, for Florrie had given me something to dream of. So I rose from my seat to close the jalousies when a footstep sounded in the deserted street and a solitary figure advanced slowly up the Corso towards the Piazza. It stopped opposite the Casa Perdicaris, and looked up at it, and then resumed its way, singing softly. As it emerged from the shadow of the houses it paused again, and this time directly in front of our house. I shrank back instinctively as the singer raised his eyes, but remained near the window to

listen to the sweet tones that, with exquisite distinctness, were pouring forth Mozart's serenade from Don Giovanni.

I listened till the sounds of that low, clear voice had died away, until after a pause the footsteps sounded again, getting gradually fainter until they died into silence, and then I lay down with a strange, misty happiness upon me.

This was the same voice I had heard the other night, but how came the singer to linger beneath my window? And I fell asleep with Mirko Stefanović's words echoing in my ears, "Why not for you, Miss Seymour?"





## CHAPTER VI.

## A HALF CONFESSION.

not leave Fiume. He had business to transact with Perdicaris relative to some property of his mother's, of which the old Greek was one of the trustees—so much he had told me casually one day when mentioning the long-standing acquaintance between the two families. And this piece of information I communicated to George with a show of mystery and discretion that forbade inquiry into details. I cannot say that my brother-in-law received it with becoming interest or

as much credulity as politeness demands, for I have a vague recollection of his giving vent to a long whistle, and a very slang exclamation, which I am happy not to be obliged to transcribe. whatever nature was this business which delayed Stefanović's departure from Fiume for now close on six weeks, it did not appear to make very heavy demands upon his time, for his afternoons and evenings. and very often his mornings too, were spent either in our little sitting-room, or passed in wandering about the neighbourhood with us. We had all grown to regard him so completely as one of our circle that, when once or twice he excused himself from dining with us or accompanying us on any walk or excursion, a gloom fell over the entire family; George resenting his absence almost as an offence, while Flossy

insisted on standing by his empty chair at the dinner-table, a silent, sulky monument of desertion.

I know not how it began or how it grew. but an intimacy had sprung up between ourselves and Villiers' friend in the space of six short weeks as is quite incompatible with English notions and quite inexplicable to the British mind. But then the Greshams and myself had lived chiefly abroad of late years, and had grown to accept many foreign customs and adopt many Continental habits; so that it did not seem strange to us that within two months, one who had been a stranger to us before that period, should have become the intimate friend of the household. Then Stefanović happened to be one of those people whom one can admit into intimate intercourse without any misgivings as to unpleasant results. With him there was no fear that intimacy would ever degenerate into familiarity; if he became more free in the expression of his opinions, he also grew still more careful not to wound his hearers' susceptibilities; if he grew more frank and cordial in his manner to Florence and myself, that kind of deference I have so often alluded to, deepened instead of diminishing as time went on.

Of a morning he was wont to join me in the Scoglietto where I daily repaired with Flossy and my embroidery for a couple of hours before breakfast. Sometimes Phil was with me, sometimes not; but Stefanović never missed. Now, looking back to that time, I sometimes wonder how I could have committed such a breach of the laws of this world as to allow a good-looking young fellow, of considerable

agreeability to meet me daily in my morning walk, and either stroll beside me beneath the shady trees of the Scoglietto or lie on the grass at my feet while I sat on one of the benches nearest the stream, plying my needle and listening to his voice. But then I was not sensible of the enormity of my misdemeanour, and never even dreamt that anyone could deem that wrong, which I felt to be so innocent. It had begun by chance—as all those things begin. Stefanović had sauntered towards the Scoglietto one morning, and found me seated in my accustomed place with Flossy sailing leaves upon the stream a few yards He had approached and addressed After a few minutes' conversation he smilingly asked, "And now, Miss Seymour, must I leave you, or may I stay and keep you company?" What could I reply? To be sure I might have put up my work and gone home, but it never struck me at the time, and he stayed. When I told Florence of it she agreed with me that I could not have acted otherwise—that it would have been "rude" and "prudish" to have bade him go. George only laughed, and wondered how Fred would like it. It was clear they both thought I would accept Fred Villiers yet.

And there it was, on the grassy bank of the little stream, beneath the shady trees and the bright blue summer sky that we learnt to know one another.

His was a strange nature, and one which, if difficult to understand, it is quite impossible to describe. Proud and haughty of his country and his name, he was blushingly modest concerning himself personally. Full of generous impulses and inclinations,

he was yet capable of the most unjust action if he fancied himself slighted or betraved. Besides, as he himself avowed. "he had learnt to act first and reason afterwards in a school of danger;" and he followed this precept so consistently that, from leaping a hedge to shooting an offender, he never paused to weigh the question, but acted on the impulse of the moment, or, as he said, "the prompting of his good angel." And this was another phase in this strangely contradictory character; a strong coating of superstition laid on the very slightest basement of Christianity. If ever we touched on religion in the course of our morning conversations, he would dismiss the subjectquietly, but decisively, with the tone of a man who knows his views will not be in accordance with his hearer's, and prefers

not to give expression to them. Whereas, when recounting a narrow escape, a hazardous venture, through which he had come unscathed, it was his constant habit to say, "I knew my good angel would not forsake me."

"I sometimes think that friend of Villiers' a confounded ass," George would say occasionally, "and at others I am more inclined to believe him a consummate knave."

"He's neither," I replied at last, losing patience one day.

Some days he was merry and gay, helping Flossy to float her leaf-boats down the stream, seemingly finding as much interest and excitement in the occupation as she did herself; while I sat by unheeded, but happy, I knew nor cared not why. On others he was moody and silent, lying for

an hour at a time at my feet without uttering a word, and then breaking forth into some mournful, wild Hungarian song or launching forth into a scarcely less wild condemnation of life in general, and his lot in particular. At first these strange moods would puzzle and even offend me; then, when I knew him better, I tried to laugh him out of them, or rebuke him for them, but it did no good. And with time I learnt to keep silence while they lasted, and this was the wisest course, and seldom failed to bring him, penitent and smilingly contrite, to my feet.

It may seem strange that in all this time I had never yet seen old Perdicaris's daughter. The old man I had seen repeatedly, and felt an instinctive distrust of in spite of his almost slavish civility to myself and the Greshams. Helen Perdi-

caris, his wife, I had also seen on two or three occasions, but I did not care to push the acquaintance further. She was a dark, forbidding-looking woman, with thick black eyebrows meeting across her forehead, and surmounting a pair of deeply sunk, flashing, restless orbs. Her features were regular, but coarsely and heavily moulded, and a faint dark line—a sort of incipient moustache—fringed her upper lip. Her teeth were very white, and always visible when she spoke or smiled. But their daughter I had never seen. She had been taken ill shortly after the night on which Florence had seen her, and though now convalescent had not yet left the house.

"She is very beautiful, is not she?" I inquired of Stefanović one day as we sauntered up and down the Scoglietto side by side.

- "Who? Merika Perdicaris? Yes, she is extremely beautiful," he replied listlessly.
- "Is she not an heiress too? Her father will leave her all his wealth, will he not?" I continued, glancing at his face as I spoke.
- "Yes, I believe he will leave her a large fortune," was his answer, spoken with a half disdainful smile, which I was then at a loss to interpret.
- "And—and is she clever?" I pursued with an uneasy quaver in my voice.
- "No, I do not think so," he answered quickly, and I drew a sigh of relief, "but," he added gravely, "she is what is far better in my estimation: she is fresh, and good, and innocent of heart as is that child," and he pointed to Flossy.

One day that it was raining hard, and that all thought of going out had to be

relinquished. I bethought me I could not better employ my time than in replying to Villiers' letter. He had begged for an answer, but he had also besought me to take time for consideration ere giving him my final reply. It was only on sitting down, pen in hand, that I became aware of how very little reflection I had bestowed upon the subject during the intervening six weeks, and yet my mind was made up. I could give him but one answer-"No." If I had any doubt or hesitation before, I had none now, and without too nearly questioning myself as to the process by which the doubts had been dispelled, I was conscious, blushingly conscious, of an outward influence, indirect and imperceptible, which had been brought to bear on my decision. So I took my pen and wrote to Villiers, telling him that what he wished

could never come to pass. I wrote at great length, stringing senseless phrases and offensive platitudes together with the facility of a heroine of romance. him forget me in one sentence, and constantly bear in mind my faithful friendship in the next. I mourned my inability to care for him with such deep pathos as dimmed my own eyes and doubtless caused him an unnecessary amount of pain. I advised him to go and seek a worthier object on whom to bestow his affections, and wound up with assurances of unchangeable regard and a sort of vague feeling of having done something noble and self-sacrificing, while a dim, uncomfortable doubt also pervaded my mind as to whether, on the whole, my epistle was not rather calculated to impress an unprejudiced reader with the notion that I

a sort of martyrdom on my feelings for some cause or causes unknown. So I added a paragraph of redeeming coldness, expressing my sense of the honour he had done me, in the most vapid and unmeaning words I could find, and finally scrawled a postscript begging him to "look upon me as a sister" henceforth. I then sealed and addressed it, and laid it with something of ostentation on the table.

When I entered the room later in the day, I found Stefanović standing by the table with a half-amused smile on his face. I was not surprised to see him—I had expected him to come—and the Paolich family had grown so much used to his constant presence in the house as to have long since dispensed with the ceremony of announcing him.

- "I have come to make a confession, Miss Seymour, and I trust you are in a lenient mood," he said, still smiling, but with a tinge of anxiety in his tone. "I am fortunate in thus finding you alone."
- "A confession?" I repeated, with a little gesture of astonishment, though my heart beat quick at his words.
- "Aye! and I'm half afraid to make it now," he said hesitatingly.
  - "Why?"
- "Because I have sinned against you," he said slowly.

The words made me start. What was this he was about to tell me? But I answered lightly, with a mock solemnity—

"There, my son, you can take that stool, nay, I shall dispense with your kneeling, you can sit on it—well, if you prefer it. And now confess."

- "What shall I say?" he asked, kneeling on the stool beside my chair, with his eyes fixed on my face.
  - "The truth, always," I laughed.
- "And if I did, you would probably refuse me absolution," he answered.
- "Indeed!" I murmured, again almost shivering at his words. "But proceed."
- "Nay, but a Confessor generally helps one, reminds one," he remonstrated.
  - "What of?"
- "One's various faults and failings—inquiring concerning them, and suggesting roads to amendment."
- "Oh, I see," I cried quickly, and then with an assumption of severity, asked:
  "Are you conscious of a proud, haughty spirit, my son, that brooks no interference and pardons no offence? Have you experienced any temptation to act solely on

impulse, despising calmer reason and wiser: prudence, and adopting in preference the dictates of your own inclination? Do you ever give way to caprices of temper and "—

- "Hold, hold," he cried, laughing. "I acknowledge them all, only spare me their enumeration. What penance do you impose, Miss Seymour?"
- "That you shall absent yourself for a week at least," I said arehly, and paused.
- "Impossible!" he cried, trying to take my hand.
  - " From casa Perdicaris," I concluded.
- "Ah!" he exclaimed, drawing back, and with a chord passing over his face. For a moment neither spoke, and then he leant forward and addressed me in a low, serious voice, and with a grave look in his eyes, "Miss Seymour, I came here to-day to own to you that—that I had betrayed

a trust, but you made me forget it, and now it is still harder to say. Still I must tell you."

I felt myself grow pale as he spoke, and when he paused I merely bowed my head; I could not speak.

"I have no excuse to plead—I dare not put forward the true cause in extenuation of my fault—Miss Seymour. I withheld a letter from you: here it is."

He handed it to me as he spoke, and his hand trembled violently as he did so. I glanced at his face as I took it; it was ashy pale.

"It is not of the least consequence," I said, glancing at the superscription in Villiers' hand.

"But I received it long ago—in a letter Villiers sent me to Gresham's care, you remember?" he went on hurriedly.

- "It is of no moment, I assure you," I said as I read the few lines it contained which were merely to urge me to take time ere giving my decision, "and will not even necessitate my opening my letter," and I pointed to the table.
- "You have written to Villiers?" he said hesitatingly.
  - " Yes."
- "Am I to congratulate him?" he asked in a low, unsteady voice, clutching my chair nervously as he spoke.
  - "No," I whispered decisively.
- "Meta," he exclaimed, seizing my hands and kissing them wildly; and then rising suddenly, he said earnestly, entreatingly, "Oh! forgive me, I implore you forgive me—I forgot myself—I knew not what I did," and ere I could speak he was gone.
  - "What does it mean?—oh! what does

it all mean?" I cried helplessly to myself that night as I recalled all his words and looks of the morning. "Did he—could it be he loved me? Yet, oh! why had he seemed angry with himself for being betrayed into acknowledging it?"

I did not close my eyes until the morning, and then I fell into a restless, fevered sleep, from which I awoke at short intervals with a start, and the sound of my name in my ears uttered in an eager, passionate voice, "Meta!"





## CHAPTER VII.

A STILL, CLOUDY DAY.

the days of expectancy and nights of doubt and disappointment that followed the events of the last chapter. Hour by hour I looked for him to come and explain—nay, I would have been content to waive all explanation, to forget our troubled interview and welcome him back as before—but he came not. I longed to show him that he need not fear to meet me, that I expected no disclosure—desired no confession, but he came not. I counted the hours as they passed, and every hour

added to my torture of doubt and expectancy, until I sought my room at night utterly worn out with watching and disappointment, and then my misery would break forth into deep, heartbroken sobs, and I would cry aloud in my wretchedness, calling him by the name I gave him in my thoughts. "Oh! Mirko, come back to me—oh, come back to me—I cannot, cannot bear it."

And still I bore it: I was forced to bear it, and make no sign. I could tell no one my trouble—for I had nothing to tell—nothing that I could have explained. Had I attempted to do so, it would have been to find myself misunderstood and Mirko blamed. And so I talked, and smiled, and tried to appear light-hearted and happy with my sorrow hid far out of sight. One only thing I could not bring

myself to do—I could not go out. What! go and tread those walks alone, where I had so lately walked with him at my side; sit beneath those shady trees, miserable and forsaken, where he had been wont to lounge at my feet, making me unspeakably, unreasonably happy by his very presence. It was impossible. Besides, if he returned—if ever he returned—would not he most probably seek me on the very spot where he had left me? Yes, I would wait for him, and he should find me (if he came) seated where he had left me so abruptly on that day.

A dozen times a day I would rise nervously from my seat to alter some trifle in the arrangement of the room. One moment I thought, "Perhaps it might be painful to him to be reminded of our interview. I will try and change the

aspect of the room, and hide away all: tokens of our former intimacy." Then suddenly I would say to myself, "No, I. will endeayour to make everything appear as usual, and meet him myself as though nothing had occurred between us." And then again, and a faint tinge of hope coloured this last resolution: "If he cares for me, he might like to see some token of his having been thought of while absent, on his return." And then I drew from my pocket, where it had been kept since that last interview, now a week past, a little volume of Longfellow's poems with a mark still in it at the place where he had left off reading to me, as he often had: done of a morning in the Scoglietto. I looked at the flyleaf: it bore his name, "Mirka Stefanović," in the fine, delicate handwriting I was now familiar with. I opened.

the book where the mark was, and my eye fell on a passage in "Evangeline," where she and her lover are parting, and she whispers—

Gabriel, he of good cheer, for if we love one another, Nothing on earth can harm us, whatever mischances may happen.

And I closed the book with an impatient sigh. I thought I could have borne to part with him—for ever even—if I might have uttered such words as these, and felt the same assurance of my Gabriel's love.

And meanwhile Florence and George were adding to my burden of care by their increasing questions and remarks concerning Mirko.

"He did not hint any intention of going away, did he, Meta?" Florrie would ask again and again, in spite of my oft repeated assurance that he had never mentioned the subject. "It's very odd!"

"I see the whole matter quite clearly for my part," George would observe pompously. "You may take my word for it, he's gone and proposed to that girl with the money, and is damnably ashamed of himself, and won't show until the whole business is over."

I had begun to think he had left Fiume, gone without a word of farewell, perhaps never to return (for George's interpretation of his absence I could not accept for a moment), when, as we were just rising from breakfast one morning, I caught the sound of a man's step rapidly ascending the stairs, and heard the tones of a well-known voice, begging Maria Paolich not to "incommodarsi," as he knew the way. I started up from my chair, and an involuntary cry escaped me in the sudden agitation of the moment, which happily,

however, passed unnoticed in the surprise occasioned by the entrance of Mirko Stefanović. He looked eager and excited, and the flush on his dark cheek and the bright—almost triumphant—light in his eve made him look handsomer than ever. He advanced, too, with such genuine warmth and cordiality in his manner that all George's intentions of "giving him a cool reception," and "keeping him at a distance in future," melted instantly, and he greeted him with evident gladness. Florence, too, was glad to welcome him back; while Flossy danced round and round him in an irrepressible frenzy of delight.

"Oo'll come and sail my boats for me again, won't oo, please?" she cried eagerly, the moment he had entered.

"Hush! Flossy, hush!" said Florence.

- "Because Aunt Meta won't amuse Flossy now—oh, for such a time!" continued my incorrigible niece; and my face flushed crimson as Mirko's eyes glanced up at me at her words.
- "I have been overwhelmed with business," replied Mirko to George's interrogations concerning his desertion of us. "I was obliged to go to Trieste for a couple of days, and spent the remaining time in writing and receiving letters and telegrams without intermission."
- "Hang it! man, that didn't prevent your dropping us a line," began George in a tone half of jest, half of resentment.
- "I was on the point of doing so more than once," he said, "but I always put it off, preferring to come and make my apologies and explanations" (glancing at me) "personally."

"You'll dine with us of course," said Gresham, and Mirko accepted.

And I? I sat a little back from the rest, silent and apparently unmoved, while my heart was singing a little jubilee to itself over the return of the wanderer, and was filled with true joy at his presence.

"And, politically, is there anything now going on at Trieste?" asked George in the course of conversation.

"No, I think not," was Mirko's reply, while a faint smile hovered about his mouth for a moment; "though I think it will not be long before there is a rising in the South."

"How do you mean?"

"That there will be a little revolution in Dalmatia, ostensibly caused by the Landwehr,' but attributable to a very different source."

- "Then, you think it's a scheme of"—began Gresham, interested.
- "Halt!" laughed Mirko. "I am not free to pronounce an opinion, being in some measure personally involved in this business."
  - "What, with the rebels?"
- "Yes, with the rebels," was the reply, delivered in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone, which was not changed when he turned to Florence a few minutes later and addressed her, save that it softened a little, as it always did in speaking to women.
- "What do you say to an expedition to Nugent's Castle on the Hill, Mrs. Gresham? It is a still, cloudy day, just suited for the purpose. Miss Seymour has more than once expressed a wish to see Tersatto, and I fancy we could not have a better opportunity."

- "Oh! I wish you could persuade her to go," cried Florence innocently. "She is suffering from continual headaches, and I'm sure she stays too much in the house."
- "Would you go, then, Florrie?" I asked hesitatingly.
- "I could not walk so far, dear," she replied; then, glancing archly at George, added, "but if anyone were to offer to drive me up"—
- "Well, I suppose I must," said George with comic resignation; "that is, if there's any sort of trap to be got."
- "Oh! I'll see to that," said Mirko, "so don't give yourself any trouble about it."
- "And will you drive with me, or walk up and meet us, Meta?" asked my sister.

I hesitated a moment, feeling that Mirko's eyes were upon me while he awaited my decision. "What should I do? What ought I to do?" I asked myself; "perhaps to drive would be the more prudent course."

And then, involuntarily, unconsciously, I raised my eyes to his face, and a quick gesture of entreaty—a look of appeal which met my gaze—decided me.

"I will walk up, I think, and meet you, Florrie," I said; and it was settled.

It was decided that we should dine early, and go up to Tersatto after dinner, Mirko prophesying that in spite of the present cloudy appearance of the day we were sure of a grand sunset at its close, and that we ought to see it in its full glory from the windows of the ruined castle.

"That fellow's been plotting in all sorts of conspiracies," remarked George in his dictatorial way, when Mirko had left us to procure the carriage. "And mark my

words, he'll be shot for it yet one of these days."

- "Good Heavens! how horrible!" oried Florence, "after knowing him so intimately."
- "Yes," acquiesced George dryly, "I had overlooked that aggravation of the catastrophe."
- "But I really don't think you need have any fears on his behalf yet," I said shortly, "considering on what slight foundation George's predictions are based."
- "Why, my good child," said George with that half bantering tone of superiority that invariably drove me distracted, "he as good as avowed it himself."
  - "In jest," I put in.
- "And as to that other matter, which old Perdicaris hinted to me," he continued, "I see no reason to disbelieve it."

"Now you've confused the questions in a manner worthy of a woman," I said, laughing, in spite of my eagerness.

"But, my dear Meta," said Florrie with serene gravity, "you really should not jump at conclusions. We have no reason to believe one way or the other, but it is more than probable that a man who's in a conspiracy to kill another man, is also in that other plot that George mentions."

"A truly logical deduction," observed George quietly, "and an excellent specimen of the capability of the female mind to grasp a difficult subject."

"George!" I exclaimed reproachfully, but Florence did not see his satire.

Our dinner passed over very pleasantly, and nothing was said of a more private or personal nature in the course of it. At about four, the carriage—a quaint-looking, little vehicle for two, with a shaggy chestnut pony in it—drove up to the door.

"We'll give you three quarters of an hour's start," said George, "and then set off, for I am sure that little beast can go, though he's no great beauty to look at."

And so we started, Mirko, Phil, and myself—Flossy was to drive with her father and mother, to her undisguised disappointment.

We took our way slowly through the town to the foot of the hill on which Tersatto stands. The day was sultry, though the sun was hidden, and the sky was covered with heavy grey clouds—but already these were beginning to break in different points, and allowed little glimpses of the blue sky above them. Mirko talked gaily as we went of the old castle to which we were going; of the little church

that stands on the same plateau, and commands nearly as fine a view of the bay; of the old Field-Marshal who had lived in the old ruin, even after it was a ruin, and the traditions and legends current among the Fiumani concerning the picturesquely-situated church of Santa Maria degl' Angeli.

"I am not quite sure," he said gravely, but if I am not mistaken it was built to commemorate the fact, and mark the spot where the Virgin Mary's house is said to have rested on its journey to Loreto."

We had now reached the foot of a long flight of stone steps, which, ascending in a straight line up the side of the hill, led to the church and the castle. They were very steep, and being upwards of three hundred in number (if I am not mistaken), interrupted our conversation until we

reached the grass plateau at the summit. What a glorious panorama now lay at our Directly beneath us nestled the little town, picturesque at this distance, with its sober-coloured slanting roofs and narrow windows. Here and there through it, in the squares and open places, the bright costumes of the peasant women gave momentary gleams of life, as they passed by, to the silent picture. Beyond it stretched the calm, waveless sea, leaden-coloured today with the reflection of the clouds, and perfectly motionless. A few small brigs and a couple of fishing boats were lying at anchor round the pier, pointing their bows in different directions with a diversity of opinion as to whence the hot, heavy air, that was scarcely a breeze, was coming. About the middle of the bay stood a solitary "Bragozzo," still and motionless, with

her yellow sail hanging in heavy, unstirred folds, and her vane twirling hesitatingly, now this way, now that, as she swayed imperceptibly with the unseen movement of the waters.

Bounding the bay on either side rose softly undulating hills, while three islands stretched across its mouth, seemingly enclosing it all to a narrow opening to the right. The clouds were still rising towards the west, and boded well for the glorious sunset Mirko had predicted. There was something grand and solemn in the scene before me: the light, the air, the sea, had all that strange, silent stillness in them that seems always to presage a storm, and the same-half peaceful, half melancholy calm was stealing over me.

"You always rebuke me for 'superstition' and 'presentiment,' Miss Seymour," said Mirko gently to me, "and yet I think you yourself were now experiencing something of what I say."

"Yes, I suppose you would call it so," I said, turning my back to the motionless sea and moving towards the church.

"And was the presentiment of good or evil?" he asked almost eagerly.

"I scarcely know—of a coming storm, I think," was my light reply.





## CHAPTER VIII.

## TERSATTO.

emplay conscientiousness. There was not a window we had not looked through, not a flight of steps we had not attempted more or less effectually to ascend, scarcely a stone over which one or more of our party had not stumbled in the laudable attempt to see more than his neighbours. We had looked from the terrace at the view we had seen from the door, and had been duly frightened, while in that elevated position, by Florence's sudden giddiness and Phil's adventurous-

ness. We had listened with polite interest to the unintelligible flow of detail given us unsparingly by our guide—an old, deaf man with a crutch in one hand and a huge key hanging by a bit of twine from the forefinger of the other, which he kept swinging, as he spoke, in close proximity to Flossy's head in an alarming manner. We were beginning to move in the direction of the chapel with a sense of relief, I think, at the approaching termination of our expedition, and Florence and George had already preceded us in that direction, when, as I was about to follow, Mirko detained me quietly, and, leading me back, drew me towards a window of the ruin that looked away from the sea down into a deep, narrow glen. The castle stands on the edge of the rock on this side, and the window looks down on the steep, unbroken precipice.

- "An ugly fall it would be n'est ce pas?"
  he said musingly. "A hard, cruel way to
  punish a faithless woman."
- "What do you mean?" I asked, stepping back instinctively as I spoke.
- "Do you not know the tragic story connected with this window?" he said. "One of the lords of this castle—in olden times—suspected his wife of faithlessness, and swore to be revenged upon her. So he bade a servant come into the room at dusk, when the light was fading from the sky, and hand his mistress a letter. Then, as she approached the window to read it by the pale evening light, he pushed her over."
  - "How horrible!" I exclaimed.
- "Very horrible; but yet if he was jealous and she faithless"—
  - "What! would you excuse it?"

- "No, but I can understand it."
- "Do you mean to say that you?"-
- "That I could do it?" he said, finishing my sentence for me. "No, not that way," he said, pointing to the precipice, "but if she betrayed me she should die," and he laid his hand on a small jewelled dagger he wore in his scarf.
- "And if you betrayed her?" The words escaped me, and I blushed crimson when they were uttered.
- "I could not. I would sooner die a thousand deaths," he answered in a low, earnest voice, "and you know it."
- "We had better join them," I said hurriedly, startled by the sudden earnestness of his manner. "They will wonder where we are," and I moved towards the door.
- "One word, Miss Seymour," said Mirko, detaining me lightly, "are you tired?"

- "Tired? not in the least. Why?"
- "Because I feared you might have intended driving back," he answered; " and will you wait for the Benediction in the chapel;"
  - "Yes, if you wish it," I replied.
- "Thank you," he said, and we then hastened to join the others.

They had left the chapel, and were standing on the grass-grown terrace in front of it, admiring the gorgeous view of the bay, as the sun began to shine through the break in the clouds.

- "Where have you been!" cried Florence as we approached; "we have been wondering what had become of you."
- "I was telling Miss Seymour a legend of this old place," said Mirko easily, "and took her to the scene of the incident to add force to the horror of the catastrophe.

But look," he added, pointing to the erimson colour now lighting up the clouds, "was not I right that we should have a beautiful sunset?"

And even as he spoke, a broad flood of golden sunshine spread over the landscape before us, gleaming forth with almost a fierce splendour from the rent in the heavy dark clouds. They paled, and then reddened, and gradually rolled away, leaving the setting sun in undisturbed possession of the glowing west. It shone out upon the calm, waveless sea, and the little vellowsailed "Bragozzo," still stationary and motionless in the midst of the bay. It lit up the surrounding mountains, casting bold. sharp lines of shadow into the valleys that lay between them, and streamed in at the frameless doors and windows of the old castle before which we stood, making it

stand out more grim and weird than ever in its rugged blackness against the rosy evening sky. Unconsciously I clasped my hands with a sort of silent adoration of the beauty of the scene. I could have stood thus for hours I thought, and never grown weary.

"Do you feel it chilly?" asked Florrie, breaking in on my reverie. "I declare I feel almost cold."

"I think it's time we were moving," said George, looking at his watch; "it's ten minutes to seven."

"Will you drive back with me, Meta?" inquired Florence, drawing her shawl round her, "or do you prefer walking?"

"Well, you see, I had set my heart on attending the benedizione in the church," I explained, "but if you wish me to accompany you"—

- "Oh, on no account, dear," she said good-naturedly; "do whatever you like best. I must go at once, I think, for I fear the damp both for myself and Flossy; but do not you hasten home on that account."
- "You won't be anxious, Mrs. Gresham, if we are a little late after you in getting home?" said Mirko as he helped my sister into the carriage, and disposed her wraps about her.
- "Oh! dear no," said Florrie with a gentle smile, "for I know you'll take good care of our Meta."
- "Will you have a shawl to put round your shoulders, Madge?" asked Gresham, holding one up.
- "No, thank you, George, and please call me by my name."
  - "You'd better, dear," urged Florrie.

"Indeed, I'm not in the least chilly."

"If you'll allow me, I will carry it for you," said Mirko, quietly; "it may be colder later on," and he took it from George's hand, and laid it across his shoulder.

I protested no longer, but bidding them good-bye, turned away with a heightened colour as I heard George as they drove off saying to Florrie—

"You're all alike, you women, the most sensible of you "— etc., etc., etc.

We now bent our steps towards the little church, on the windows of which the sun was still burning.

"Can't I wait for you here, Aunt Meta?" asked Phil as we were about to enter. "I don't want to see a pack of"—

"Yes, dear, you can wait here, only don't go away from this plateau," I said hurriedly, interrupting him ere he could

finish a sentence which I well knew would not be remarkable for tact.

And then Mirko lifted the heavy quilted portière of deep green that hung across the doorway, and signed to me to enter.

The interior of the little church was singularly bare-looking. The walls on either side were whitewashed and unrelieved by any attempt at decoration, while the red brick floor was innocent of bench, chair or stool of any description. The altar was decked in faded blue calico and tattered looking lace, surmounted by a huge dark picture stuck all over with little silver hearts, and further adorned with two pairs of coral earrings; but I could make no guess as to whom it represented by the dim light of the two flaring candles that glared before it. Below it was an image of the Virgin in a low gown, with a silver

crown on her head and a pearl necklace round her throat. On either side of this were four vases, standing two and two on little calico-covered steps, holding large cone-shaped bouquets of wax flowers; and behind all, with its head and arms only appearing above the big painting, towered a large crucifix carefully shrouded in dusty brown holland. Over the entrance was the organ-gallery with a sort of screen of gilt scroll work stretching across it to hide the choir from view; and to the left an old worm-eaten confessional of long bygone fashion and shattered condition, in front of which lay a bright patchwork of gay colouring thrown by the last sunbeams through the one old stained-glass window. Over all there hung a look of poverty and desolation. Nor did the appearance of the worshippers detract from this melancholy

aspect. They consisted of some fifteen or twenty old women, poorly clad in sombre colours, and almost all wearing black hand-kerchiefs on their heads; a couple of men, seemingly infirm, and a little child of two or three years, whose pale, wan mother could not keep from turning its chubby face round to look and laugh a merry little chuckle at me.

For a few minutes after we entered there was complete silence in the church, broken only by the occasional rattle of a rosary or the short, harsh cough of the pale young woman. A few of the women looked over their shoulders at us—they were all kneeling on the floor round the altar—but without interrupting their devotions, which they repeated in a sort of fervent whisper. Presently a little old priest bustled in with apparent haste, and

forthwith began the service. It was conducted throughout with such rapidity and in so low and indistinct a tone that I marvelled how anyone could follow it. Suddenly there came a pause, and then the organ broke forth in rich, full chords, filling the little edifice with thrilling melody; it stopped in a moment to be succeeded by a choir of men's voices singing in concert with a sweetness and precision that bespoke training. They stopped in their turn, and the organ pealed forth again. and so on: the instrument and the voices alternated in one unbroken melody of wonderful power and beauty.

- "They sing well," whispered Mirko, watching my sincere admiration.
  - "Beautifully," I replied.
- "Wait till they come to the tenor's solo," he whispered again. "It is the grandest part of this composition."

- "You know it then?" I asked.
- "Oh! yes, I have sung it often."

There was a short interval of silence after this, and then the organ gave forth three or four soft chords of introduction, and then two or three tenor voices in unison burst into a glorious hymn of praise. One voice there was, however, that swelled above the rest, and rose and fell with a wealth of sound the others could not attain. Somehow I felt this voice was not unknown to me-yes! I had heard it before, surely—but where? Then a thought flashed across me. It was the voice I had heard in the street at night; and I turned to tell Mirko of my discovery. But he was not there! For a moment I was startled to find myself thus unexpectedly alone, but then I thought, perhaps he has gone forward to kneel with the rest, where the heretic (myself) cannot see him. And the

thought was a very sweet one. And with a sudden impulse, borne of many different and contending emotions, I, too, sank on my knees in my solitary corner. I know not how long I remained thus, but when I lifted my head the sunlight had faded, the worshippers were gone, and the evening gloom was deepening rapidly in the dimly-lighted church. Beside me stood Mirko, leaning against a pillar, with an expression in his eyes that I can never forget. I rose hurriedly, and muttered something, I know not what, about being sorry I had kept him waiting.

"And I am glad," he said tenderly, "as I should not else have seen you as I have now done."

I turned away my blushing face, and hastened out into the cool evening air. The clouds had quite cleared now, and the stars were beginning to brighten in the fair blue sky.

- "Oh! Aunt Meta, what a time you've been!" cried Phil, running up to me, "and there's a wedding going on, and—I wanted to ask you to let me go and see it."
  - "But where is it?" I asked bewilderedly.
- "Oh! in a house just behind the church, not twenty yards from it," he replied breathlessly. "Do let me go and look at it, they're dancing and having all sorts of fun."
- "Let him go," urged Mirko in a low tone.
- "But we ought to go home," I said hesitatingly.
- "Only ten minutes, auntie," pleaded Phil.
- "There, go, I'll be responsible for your re-appearance," said Mirko, "so mind and

come back soon;" then he added to me, as Phil ran off, "Forgive me for having acted without your leave, but if you are not impatient to return"—

- "But supposing I am," I broke in petulantly.
- "In that case I hasten to repair my error," he said coldly.
- "Don't you think Florence will be uneasy about us?" I inquired in a conciliatory tone, after a moment's pause.
- "No, do you?" he asked with a bright smile.
- "Do you know," I said, ignoring his question, except by a little toss of my head, "I have heard my mysterious tenor again."
  - "Indeed? How odd!"
- "Yes! and am more charmed by him than ever, surtout," I added, laughing,

"as I had the negative satisfaction of knowing that if not for me, his serenade was not for others, as the favoured person can scarcely have been in that humble congregation."

"And why not for you?" he said slowly.

"Oh! for many reasons," I returned.

"First, I don't know him."

"I beg your pardon, you do."

"Secondly, he does not know me."

"Again, excuse me, you are mistaken."

"Thirdly, that he would not care for my approbation."

"And there you are most in error of all," he cried, "for one word of approval from you is dearer to him than anything in this world."

In an instant the truth flashed upon me, and I exclaimed repreachfully —

"Oh! why did not you tell me it was yourself?"

While I was recovering from my confusion, he busied himself with erecting me a sort of little throne, with the shawl he carried, on the steps at the church door.

"Now, sit down, my queen, and let me talk to you," he said presently, leading me to it.

I obeyed, and he took up his accustomed place at my feet.

"When last I asked for an interview with you," he said, "it was in the *rôle* of penitent before my confessor. This evening I come as petitioner before my queen."

I was silent. What could I say? Light words would not come to my lips at that moment, and how else was this speech to be answered?

"Miss Seymour," he continued, changing

his gay tone for a grave one, "you must not think me the less in sober earnest because I have hitherto spoken lightly. What I have to say to you is of the gravest importance to me—will you hear me?"

I assented, and he began.





## CHAPTER IX.

## "LA REINE LE VEULT."

recent behaviour is due both to you, Miss Seymour, and to myself," he said, "and it is to this end that I begged you to favour me with an interview here, where we cannot be interrupted. I shall have to quit Fiume soon, perhaps never to return, and I would leave you with as good an impression of me as possible." He paused a moment, and then resumed, while my heart beat wildly, and my breath came quick and short. "I know that my conduct at our last interview must have

seemed inexplicable and even blameworthy. I have come to ask your pardon."

- "We forgive you," I said, with a feeble attempt at jocularity.
- "Most gracious Queen Margaret," he said smilingly, and looking up into my face, "withhold your pardon yet until you have heard all."
  - "But I want no explanation," I began.
- "I am very sorry to hear it," he said, "for I am obliged to make you one;" then more gravely, "I had no right to ask you concerning your reply to Villiers—no right to rejoice at your refusal—and none to show you my joy on hearing it; yet I did all three. Can you guess why?"

I was silent, but my eyes fell beneath his gaze.

"Because I love you, Meta!" he cried

passionately, seizing my hands, and clasping them tightly between his own, "because I love you with my whole heart and soul, and could not bear the thought of your becoming his wife! And now, Meta—let me call you so to-night—now, darling, I have come to ask you to forgive me all my madness and folly before I leave you for ever."

He paused an instant to master his agitation, and then went on hurriedly as though to prevent any possibility of my replying.

"Two months ago I would have laughed him to scorn who would have told me I should ever love a woman as I love you, Meta; beyond everything, above everything, to the exclusion of all else. I have never been rich, but never until now did I feel the lack of

wealth a torment and a bitterness. I have spent my life hitherto in travelling, and I was satisfied if my means sufficed to gratify my desire of travel. Now I wish for riches with an eagerness I cannot describe; can you divine the reason, Meta?"

Again he was silent for a moment, but resumed presently.

"When I came here I came impressed by Villiers with the idea that you were his affianced wife. As I learnt to know and love you, this idea became torture to me; when your own lips told me of your refusal of him, I could not conceal my joy, and yet dared not tell you my love, and therefore I left you, intending not to return. Perhaps I ought to have left Fiume when I felt that you were becoming so dear to me, but I could not leave you; besides, I then hoped "—

He stopped, and turning abruptly asked me, with a faint tinge of his merrier mood in his look and tone—

"Has not Gresham been puzzled by my intimacy with Perdicaris? I am quite sure he has his own theories concerning it. But you, Meta," he added gravely, "you must not let yourself be led to think I could do what is base or dishonourable."

"I never could believe it," I whispered fervently.

"I told you," he resumed, scarce seeming to hear my interruption, "that Perdicaris was trustee for some property of my mother's, left me when I was a mere child and alone in the world. Well, in those days Perdicaris was deemed a hardworking, honest fellow, with nothing, however, to his credit beyond his irreproachable char-

acter, for he was very poor. During the long years that have intervened I had never troubled myself about this property. It was only a few weeks ago that I learnt even the amount of it. I went travelling about the world, going from place to place in search of the excitement of noveltywhich my own limited means sufficed to procure me-oblivious of Perdicaris and the property, and never dreaming that I should some day wish for a fixed home and a less restricted income. That day has come, however, and I have awakened to the sense that I ought to establish my right to this property of my mother's—to find it gone!"

"Simply what I say; it is gone!" he answered bitterly. "I cannot explain the whole matter to you in detail—I scarcely

<sup>&</sup>quot;What do you mean?"

understand it myself. But the result is plain: the property is gone, and Perdicaris a rich man!"

"Surely you will go to law about it? You must press your claims," I began eagerly.

"I cannot," he replied. "I cannot, for two reasons. Firstly, because I would not dishonour that man in his old age before the world who has so believed in and respected him; secondly, because of that frail, beautiful child," and his voice softened now, "who is not meant for the hard battles of life; she would die."

"Are there not harder fates than death?" I cried in bitter anguish.

"Oh! Meta, tell me that I have not made yours so!" he whispered fervently. "Tell me that you hate me, abhor me, but but oh! my love, my love, do not tell me I have won your heart to break it!"

"I could not help it," I sobbed helplessly, and my face fell on my hands.

I will not weary my reader with an account of the scene that followed my avowal. Almost all of us have gone through such once in the course of our lives, and very few women live to forget it. But we all agree in condemning their performance by others, and are wont to be sceptical about that which we have ceased to feel.

Mirko had not ventured to hope—as he himself said—that I could love him, and had come to open his heart to me once and then leave me for ever. But now that he had received my confession matters were changed. He had had some hope given him by a lawyer whom he had consulted while in Trieste that one portion of the property, at least, might be recovered if certain papers—the nature of which I

am unable to explain—supposed to have been burnt could but be produced. Mirko and the lawyer were both of opinion that they were in existence, but where? And in this hopeless position Mirko had decided to relinquish all attempts.

- "But why not demand the papers of Perdicaris openly since they were committed to his charge?" I asked.
- "Because he would tell me again, darling, as he told me before, that they were burnt in his house in the old town when that house was consumed by fire twelve years ago."
  - "And do you believe it?"
- "No; I believe he never got possession of them at all, but that they were hidden by my mother, and never discovered after her death."
- "And where did she live?" I asked eagerly.

- "Oh! at our house on the property in Montenegro—at Athens for a time—at Trieste."
- "Has research been made in all these places?"
  - "Yes, thoroughly and fruitlessly."
  - "And did she live nowhere else?"
- "Yes, once, for a few months only, in the neighbourhood of Cattaro."
  - "Was search made there, too?"
- "No, I had forgotten it. But it is not likely"—
- "Excuse me, Mirko," I said, pronouncing his name a little tremulously, "when was she there?"
- "At my birth, I think, or a short time after it. She was already a widow, poor soul, and flew to Cattaro from the persecutions of my uncle."
- "Then search must be made there!" I cried decisively.

"Why, ma belle?" he asked, smiling.

"How cruel to ask a woman for a motive!" I exclaimed. "But for once I happen to have one. I am convinced that it was just the time and place when your mother would have secured these papers relative to your inheritance in her sorrow, and fear and love for you."

He smiled and shook his head.

- "I cannot hope it," he said, "still, si la reine le veult, researches shall be made. But by whom?"
  - "Yourself!" I said decisively.
- "What, send me away from you now!" he cried piteously. "I cannot go."
- "Même si la reine le veult?" I asked saucily.
- "You know I will do anything you tell me," he exclaimed tenderly.
  - "Then you must go," I said gently,

"on—let me see, this is Tuesday—on Saturday next."

"As you will," assented he with a sigh.
Just then Phil appeared very hot and apologetic round the corner. He had run back the whole way, and was very sorry for his delay, he said; and Mirko smiled, and I blushed as I owned I had not been uneasy about his absence. And then we started on our homeward way, Phil preceding us down the steps playing all sorts of pranks, in what seemed an ardent endeavour to break his neck; while I followed, leaning on Mirko's arm, with my hand in his in the approved manner of lovers.

"But why not go to law with Perdicaris openly?" I reiterated with feminine pertinacity.

"For the reasons I have told you, Meta," he replied quietly.

- "Don't you think them rather Quixotic, Mirko?" I asked softly. "Just a little?"
  - "Perhaps so," answered he.
- "Have you absolutely no other reason?"

  I persisted.
- "Yes, I have one other," he said, a little dryly; "if I defy Perdicaris without the power to crush him, he can denounce me as a conspirator against the Austrian government."
- "And are you one?" asked I breathlessly.
  - "Yes, I am," was the steady reply.
  - "Oh! Mirko!"
- "Do not look reproachfully at me, darling," he whispered, with a tender smile, "for it pains me—and do not ask me to abandon those whom I have sworn to lead, for I cannot."
  - "Are you one of their leaders?"

"Yes, I am, and I only hope they may continue employing me in the secret diplomacies and negotiations, and not call upon me for active service," he said, "for I could not bear to leave you, my Meta, for such an uncertain fate. Strange!" he mused; "how dear life has become to me within the last few months, which I held so cheap before!"

And while thus conversing we arrived at our lodgings.

- "I shall be going down to Cattaro," he said to Gresham, later on in the evening, "about the end of this week. What do you say to joining me in my trip?"
- "What, travel with so dangerous a companion!" cried George laughingly.
- "Oh! but I am not going to join the insurgents just yet," he said, "not, at least, if I can help it—our arrangements

are not complete. I am going on a purely personal errand."

- "Oh! indeed, and shall you go into your own country?" asked George carelessly.
- "I am not certain—it will depend on circumstances," was the vague reply, accompanied by a little laugh.

Shortly afterwards he rose to bid us good-night, having promised to dine with us on the morrow. As he left the room I, too, was leaving it to take Flossy to bed, and when he had closed the door, he whispered playfully, drawing me towards him —

- "Meta, I want a promise from you."
- "Well, what is it?"
- "That you won't get into a rage with your brother-in-law, and betray our secret when you hear him forming conjectures concerning my journey to Cattaro."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'll try."

- "Nay, but promise me."
- "I promise."
- "For though Gresham likes me personally, as I believe, he naturally would resent my trying to carry you off."
  - "Why, Mirko?"
- "Because he knows that there is no one worthy of you, my darling, and because," he added, laughing, "he thinks that being the case, better give you to a steady-going, good-natured Englishman than a wild, half-civilized Montenegrin."
- "But if I do not love the one, and I do"—but my sentence was never finished; perhaps the reader can guess why.
- "As to his doubt as to whether he will go into Montenegro or not," George was saying when I entered the sitting-room, "that was all put on, for he is quite determined to go, I could see that."
  - "Didn't you see how confused he

looked?" he asked us after a pause, during which neither Florence nor myself had spoken. "He looked quite uncomfortable when I pushed him for an answer. Take my word for it, our friend will soon be figuring as a rebel, and I strongly suspect—an assassin."

"Strange that you should be so cordial to him, if you think so," I remarked coolly.

"But I won't split on him," he continued magnanimously, not heeding my interruption. "I won't repeat any of the imprudent hints he has dropped here."

"I should think not," cried Florence hotly. "Who could do such a thing?"

"As you say, Florrie," rejoined he somewhat abashed, "who could do such a thing?"

It was with a strange mixture of emo-

tions that I sought my bed that night. My heart was full of the wildest joy, and of the most bitter anxiety at once. I gloried in the consciousness of his love for me, and I trembled at the thought of all the dangers that beset him.

"But," I whispered to myself with a tearful smile as I laid my flushed face on the pillow, "if we love one another nothing on earth can harm us, whatever mischances may happen."





#### CHAPTER X.

#### WAITING.

He will return, I know him well, He will not leave me here to die.

H. Aïdé.

HE happy days that followed the events narrated in the last chapter passed, as such days do pass, swiftly, peacefully, leaving no landmark behind them, no monument, no memorial, but a sort of hazy vision of rest and tranquillity—a kind of "mirage" in the desert of life. We walked together, and sat under our favourite trees, forming our plans for the future with that fond lingering over every unimportant detail in which lovers delight who esteem themselves practical. Our

cottage was to be a model of prettinessour garden perfection-our library the envy of Europe—our servants unequalied for obedience and devotion: and all this was to be accomplished with little trouble, and next to no expense. I cannot help smiling-though more in pity than derision—at those plans of ours, as I look back at them across the gulf which Sorrow has since placed between the past and the present. I am sorry for the fair young girl I seem to see sitting beneath the trees with her handsome lover beside her, very sorry for her, but I cannot weep; somehow it seems as though my eyes had shed all their tears and could never weep again. Besides, she and I are so widely different; what sympathy should I have, grey haired and broken-hearted as I am, with Margaret Seymour young, hopeful, and joyous?

Saturday arrived, and we parted. We all walked down to the pier at night to see him embark on the little steamer. utterly downcast at the thought of leaving me, and all my attempts to cheer him by words of hope and affection won only a faint, sad smile and a trembling pressure of his hand in answer. The night was dark and lowering, heavy black clouds hanging low on the hot, sultry air, while the seakept up a sort of low moaning sound without any apparent motion. Florence and George were walking in front, and Mirko and I were following them with slow steps and heavy hearts.

"It is like your own brave self," he whispered fondly, pressing my hand as it rested within his arm, "to speak words of comfort and hope to me now that I may carry them with me on my lonely journey

to cheer and strengthen me. And oh! my darling," he went on more passionately, "I feel how weak and worthless I am that I cannot speak one word of consolation to you in return!"

"Meta!" he said after a pause, "a sort of presentiment is upon me of I know not what calamity or sorrow; will you be true to me whatever happens?"

"I will be true to you as long as I live," I answered earnestly.

"You know me thoroughly—with all my faults and foibles—I believe," he went on hurriedly; "tell me once more, can you entrust your happiness to my care?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I can."

<sup>&</sup>quot;And you will not let my enemies come between us?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Never."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Meta, I must go," he said in a voice

trembling with emotion. "Say God bless you, Mirko'—say you love me."

"I love you, Mirko—God bless you, and keep you! Farewell!"

For an instant his arms were clasping me, and his lips pressed to mine; and then I stood alone with the dark night shrouding me from observation, and the sea moaning sadly at my feet.

A wild desire to recall him seized me as the little steamer began to get into motion, but, though I spoke his name with my lips, no sound issued from them, and I could but watch her with straining eyes and clasped hands creeping away into the black night, bearing all that I loved most dearly from me.

"He seemed quite cut up about leaving," said George carelessly, as we retraced our steps homewards.

"Yes, poor fellow, he had tears in his eyes when he bid me adieu," said Florrie, with a slight quaver in her voice as she spoke.

"I didn't know his time was up until he came forward, and said he must hurry on board," rejoined George. "The fact is I'm afraid he'll think I was rude to him, taking so little notice of him at the last."

As soon as we gained our house, I rushed up to my own room, and securing the door flung myself on my bed in an agony of grief.

I know not how long I remained thus, but my tears had ceased to flow, and my sobs were growing less wild and frequent, when a light tap at my door attracted my attention.

"Meta, dear, won't you let me in?" asked Florrie's low, gentle tones.

"I cannot, Florrie," I replied. "I—I am tired and need rest."

"But I will not tease you," she urged. "Only one minute, dear!"

I rose reluctantly, and unlocked the door. She entered, and closed it behind her. Then, standing before me with the candle in her hand, she raised her gentle eyes to my face, and whispered wistfully—

"Poor child, cannot I help you?"

I shook my head, with a fierce struggle to keep down my sobs.

"What's this?" she cried suddenly, lifting up something glittering which hung from my neck by a wide, blue ribbon, and which I now perceived for the first time. She held it towards me. It was a large black enamel cross, with the initials M. S. in diamonds on one side of it. To the

ribbon above it was attached a slip of paper. I opened it with trembling hands, and read —

"Wear this for my sake. It was my mother's."

From that hour my secret was known to Florence, and naturally George did not long remain in ignorance of it. Gresham was very angry at it at first; blaming me for my imprudence—I fear he called it by a harder name—and accusing Mirko of want of honesty and straightforwardness in not speaking on the subject to himself. Many other harsh things he said, but I will not chronicle them: I would sooner forget them. My sister was, I believe, to the full as much disappointed by the utter failure of her plan for my future happiness, but her woman's nature told her that it were worse than useless to plead for Villiers now, and her woman's heart prompted her to comfort me, not censure. In time matters grew less unpleasant. Gresham, if not resigned, was passive, and Florence, though still regretful, was kind and sympathizing. But my troubles were still thick around I knew I could have conciliated George and my sister had I dared tell them of the Perdicaris intrigue, of the object of Mirko's journey, and of his possible wealth. But I dared not: first, because he had begged me to be silent, and secondly, I dreaded George's betraying him unintentionally to Perdicaris. And thus the days went on till they grew into weeks and the weeks into & month, and I had no tidings, save two short notes sent very soon after his departure.

The first ran thus:

### "Cattaro,

"September 1st.

### "MY OWN META,

"I have just arrived, and am about to set out on my search for the knowse my mother inhabited. May my good angel and your prayers prosper my efforts. Ever yours,

" MIRKO."

#### The second:

# "Cattaro,

"September 4th.

## "MY DARLING,

"I have found the house, but not the papers as yet. But I will search as long as there is a nook to search, and hope while there is a gleam of hope; for is it not all for you, my Meta? I will write at length in a few days. Your own,

"MIRKO."

But the promised letter never came. At first I was expectant and impatient, and Florence and George wearied me with questions I could not answer. grew restless and uneasy, and they waxed suspicious. And when the third week passed without tidings, my heart grew sick with waiting, and I began to imagine all sorts of misfortunes which might have befallen him, with an occasional gleam of hope that he wrote not because he was returning. Florence grew wistfully gentle to me now, and George's tones were unusually tender, while a cloud of doubt and distrust was gathering on his brow. Flossy, too, would come and rub her rosy cheek against my pale one with a dumb sympathy, irrepressibly touching, while even Phil lowered his voice when speaking to me, and ceased (unbidden) to slam the door.

I had grown very pale and thin in the course of these weeks, and a sort of apathy had taken possession of me, paralyzing both mind and body.

"Go into the fresh air, dearest," Florence would say coaxingly. "You must try and get back your roses ere Stefanović returns."

And I could only sigh ---

"I cannot."

At last one day at the close of September I consented to take her advice, and sauntered out with Phil for escort. I could not bring myself, however, to go to those spots we had frequented together, and therefore pleaded shopping as an excuse for limiting my promenade to the town. I wanted some worsteds, and asked Maria Paolich where I had best go for them.

"Oh! at Fumscich's in the old town," she said; "you are sure to find them. And you cannot miss it, for it's just beside the new Greek chapel to the left."

The day was clear, still, and balmy as early spring. The sea and sky were brightly blue, and the outline of the hills stood out clear and bold, with their varied covering of many-shaded brown.

"Here it is," said Phil as we approached a shabby-looking shop with a heterogeneous collection of false jewellery, silk handkerchiefs, and woollen stockings in the window. "This must be Fumacich's, for that's the Greek church. Hulloa! the door's open. Let's go and have a look at it, Aunt Meta."

"Yes, I daresay—presently," I replied as we entered the shop.

"Si, Fräulein," answered Mme. Fuma-

cich in her composite tongue to my request.

"I've got the wool—and you're going to the wedding over the way, no doubt. No, not know of it? Why—no this red is finer than the green, and three soldi dearer—as I was saying—to be sure it was all done in a hurry; but the bride is beautiful and most magnificently dressed, as I saw just now when she was going in, and—four loti?" she asked, proceeding to weigh the worsteds; and, before she had time to resume, I had paid for my purchases, and left the shop.

"Now, auntie, you'll let us have a peep at the wedding, won't you?" asked Phil coaxingly, drawing me gently towards the open door of the Greek Church, round which a little crowd of ragged urchins and unkempt women, with pitchers of water on their heads, and careworn-looking infants in their arms, were congregated to await the bride's exit.

"Well, yes, if you like," I said listlessly; "that is," I cautiously added, "if there is no great crush inside."

On the doorstep, facing the crowd, stood a man, evidently a custode or door-keeper, trying to persuade them to modulate their voices, and restrain their curiosity.

"I cannot let you in," he said quietly, "my orders are against it, but you will see her when she passes out; is not that enough?"

"And what harm would it do her that I should see her in the church?" asked a bold-faced girl, laying down her milk pails with a bump on the pavement. "I am to stop here all day, I suppose, for a glimpse of her ladyship?"

"I know what they do at the theatre

yonder when they're kept waiting," cried a dirty-faced urchin with a mischievous grin, "they take their canes and umbrellas, and rata-ta-ta-ta-ta-plan! they go and whiz! up goes the curtain," and while speaking he had twisted a wooden spoon out of the hands of a neighbouring baby, who had hitherto been sucking it with praiseworthy perseverance, regardless of the commotion around it, and applied it fortissimo to the milk pails beside him to the intense merriment of his audience.

At the same moment a grey-headed old crone of sinister aspect had crept in unperceived behind the custode's back, and seating herself on the ground inside the door, chuckled forth —

"She'll have to give me something as she passes; if not I'll curse her, curse her on her wedding day!" "Is it not permitted to enter?" I asked of the porter, approaching him with Phil close at my elbow.

"Oh! yes, Signora," he answered civilly; "you, of course, may enter, but these people I could not venture to admit;" then added, in a louder voice, "but you are late, for all the other guests have already arrived," and he motioned to us to enter.

The exterior of the Greek Church at Fiume is in nowise beautiful, bearing a strong resemblance to the surrounding houses from which it is chiefly distinguishable by its larger door and the Greek cross in grey stone that surmounts it. But it is not wanting in magnificence in the decoration of the interior.

It is a small building, calculated, perhaps, to hold some five hundred people, and the profuseness of decoration lavished upon it makes it appear even smaller than it is. The entrance door is at the side, two rows of marble columns extending down the centre, and seeming to divide it into three aisles—the centre one of which alone is well lit from a sort of dome in the roof, the side ones shrouded in contrasting gloom.

The air was heavy with incense and the perfume of flowers, whereof festoons and garlands seem to have been hung wherever it was possible to place them. To the left as we entered stood the High Altar, with twelve massive silver lamps blinking dimly before it in the morning light; and round this was collected a little group of well-dressed people standing in a semi-circle round the kneeling couple.

"Let us stand here where we shall not

disturb them," I whispered to Phil, taking up my post in the shadow of the pillar nearest the door.

"I wish they wouldn't stand so close together," whispered Phil back in an aggrieved aside. "I can't see the bride or bridegroom at all."

The low mumbling tones of the priest reached us faintly where we stood, and as there seemed no prospect of our seeing anything, and the hot, heavy air made me feel strangely faint and giddy, I was going to suggest to my nephew the propriety of our moving off before the bridal party emerged, when I was arrested by recognising in one of the ladies standing at the altar the dark, handsome face of Helen Perdicaris.

She was dressed with more than customary taste and splendour, and this first attracted my notice; but it was the expression of her face, the bright light in her dark eyes, the colour in her usually sallow cheeks, and the proud erect bearing of her head that held my attention. her side stood old Perdicaris, but there was none of her almost triumphant expression in the old man's face. He seemed to have aged greatly during the few weeks that had elapsed since my seeing him last; his hair was almost white, his eye had a dull, leaden look in it, and once or twice when he passed his hand over his brow, with the action of a man who tries to dispel an unpleasant thought, I saw that it trembled.

"Shall we go, aunt?" whispered Phil, with an anxious glance into my face. "You're so pale! Are you faint, Aunt Meta?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;No," I answered, "no, let us remain."

There was a little commotion just then amongst the people at the altar. The newly-wedded couple seemed to have risen and to be receiving the congratulations of their friends, for the little crowd broke into two knots, the ladies all collecting round the bride. I saw her first. She stepped forward, a beautiful girl of sixteen or seventeen, dark complexioned, with two large, glistening tear-drops trembling on her lashes, and a happy smile upon her lips. She came forward a few steps, and then, holding out both her hands to Helen Perdicaris, bent her forehead to receive her kiss.

"Why, Aunt Meta!" exclaimed Phil in an animated whisper, "I declare it's Miss Perdicaris!"

"Mademoiselle Perdicaris! is it?" I asked with some interest, for I had never seen her. "Are you sure? How very beautiful she is!"

- "Oh! yes, I am quite sure," answered he, and then, after a pause, added eagerly: "There, look! they're moving. Are they coming this way, aunt? I can't see him; can you aunt? Surely you—Oh, Aunt Meta! what's the matter? Are you ill? What makes you look like that? You're not going to die!"
- "No—I—sha'nt—die," I gasped painfully. "Don't be frightened. Let us go away—away—away—Oh, my God!"

A few steps only, and then I turned sharply round and called to him: a sudden thought had struck me.

- "Phil," I cried, and he hastened to me, did you—did you see him?"
- "Who, auntie?" was the bewildered question.
- "Enough, sir, enough," I answered impatiently. "You can go," and hurried away.



### CHAPTER XI:

#### PARTING.

Oh! sair did we greet and muckle did we say;
We took but a kiss, and we tore oursels away.

OLD ROBIN GRAI.

not in the direction of Tersatto, as I had told him, but towards the Scoglietto. For were not the shop-woman's words ringing even now in my ears which I had been scarcely conscious of hearing half an hour since?—"The wedding feast is to be given at the Scoglietto—a caprice of the bridegroom's it appears." And thither I was hurrying to see—Merika and her husband—Mirko Stefanović.

Yes, his was the face of the bridegroom whom I saw standing in that group at the altar. And now as I passed swiftly through the dark little dingy streets it was his face I still saw before my eyes—pale, smiling, haughty as it had looked in the church; his name that I repeated over and over to myself, scarce knowing that I did so.

On and on I went swiftly, breathlessly, never pausing to think wherefore I was going. The shock seemed to have stunned me—to have paralyzed my reason. I had not fainted, no cry had escaped me, save that one bitter moan as I left the church. My heart was not beating quicker, nay, rather, it seemed to lie cold, and heavy, and motionless at my side as though life had left it. I could not believe it. I could not realize it. Though my own eyes had

seen it, and my heart had acknowledged it with that one wild leap, I said to myself as I went, "It is a dream—a frightful, frightful dream, and I shall wake and find it gone."

"Mirko and Merika standing at the altar? What a strange dream, a hideous dream," I murmured vaguely. "It is not true, it cannot be, for he is mine and I am his, and I shall wake and find it gone."

At last I reached the old familiar spot where we had sat so often, he and I. It seemed to awaken me from the strange, wild reverie into which I had fallen, for I stopped and looked about me for a moment at the trickling stream—the seat beneath the trees—the little grass plot where he had lain at my feet, and then my sight grew confused, my strength failed me, and

with a cry, "It is true—all true!" I fell to the ground.

I do not know how long I lay there insensible, but when consciousness began to return I heard the sound of footsteps and merry voices, and, raising myself on my elbow, I saw the bridal party gaily passing a few yards off—on their way to the restaurant where the feast was prepared.

Eagerly I scanned each member of that little group in search of the face I had come to see, but in vain. Mirko was not amongst them. But his bride was there, levelier than ever. She had exchanged her satin train for her native costume—doubtless another caprice of his, for had he not told me once how beautiful she looked in the Greek dress? Her scarlet jacket richly embroidered with gold glistening brightly in the sunlight, and the

pearls she had twined in her hair gleaming white against her dark skin.

I followed her slight girlish form with my eyes as long as she was in sight, and, even when she had disappeared inside the iron gateway of the little restaurant, my eyes remained fixed in the direction in which she had gone. This girl had robbed me of my heart's one treasure, of my all, and as I gazed after her, walking by in all her youth, and happiness, and beauty, I lifted up my hands to Heaven, and prayed that I might die.

There was no passion in my grief: nay, there was a sort of stolidity rather, a seemingly calm acceptance of my cross that amazed myself. I tried to pray, but my lips repeated the familiar words over and over in vain. I could not understand them.

"What?" I asked myself, "have I not a tear for my lost love?" But no, my eyes were dry and scorching.

"It is over," I told myself; "thank God my heart has broken without a struggle." I deemed it over, it had not begun !—I did not understand it, I could not realize it.

And thus with clasped hands and tearless eyes I sat idly gazing at the stream
that rippled by at my feet, confused visions
of the past and present rising up before me,
vague and almost incomprehensible to my
stunned senses. One moment I thought I
saw him as he had looked that evening at
Tersatto, when he told me his love with
passionate words and glances more eloquent still. Again he seemed to stand
before me, haughty and smiling as I had
seen him in the church that morning, but
with an expression of deep, bitter anguish

on his face. Then suddenly it would be the tender-eyed, gently sorrowful Mirko, from whom I parted some six weeks ago, that seemed to stand before me—and then methought I saw him bending over his beautiful bride with a happy smile on his lips, and a tender light in his eyes—and I pressed my hands over my burning eyes to shut out this cruel vision!

"Yet, I would I could see him ere I die," I murmured—I was so certain I should die! "I should like to hear him say he is—happy—and to bless him, oh! my heart."

Presently a man's step sounded on the gravel behind me. Ah! that firm, light tread; I could not be mistaken, it was his! My courage failed me now as he drew nearer and nearer, and I crouched down lower to the ground, and hid my face

between my hands as he approached the spot where I lay.

He was about to pass me by—I almost thought he had done so—when he halted suddenly with an exclamation.

"Great God! Meta, Miss Seymour!"

I rose to my feet, and stood facing him, leaning against a tree for support. I tried to speak, but my trembling lips refused to form the words, and I stood silently gazing at him, suffering as I thought I could not suffer. A change passed over his face—a look of bitter hatred and disdain succeeded the amazement of the first instant, and in a voice that vibrated with scorn, he said—

"I did not venture to hope for so speedy an opportunity of offering you my humble congratulations, Miss Seymour—or, perhaps I should already say, Mrs. Villiers?"

I was silent.

- "Nay, madame," he continued with mock courtesy, "I am grieved to see you so evidently disconcerted by my knowledge of a circumstance which, as so nearly concerning your happiness, could not fail to interest me deeply. Do you remain long in Figure?"
- "I do not understand you," I muttered faintly.
- "I was enquiring whether you were likely to remain much longer in Fiume," he repeated politely, "you and Villiers?"
  - "I and Villiers?" I repeated bewildered.
- "Margaret Seymour!" cried Mirko passionately, casting off his feigned calmness, "I swore to you one day—not long ago—that if ever you betrayed me I would kill the man for whom you cast me off—shoot him like a dog—and then kill you—kill you wherever you might be, whoever

might try to shield you." He paused, and then continued with a savage laugh, "I did not think to find you in my very path!"

I was speechless, and stood trembling before him with my eyes upon his dark, cruel face.

"What? You do not plead for mercy! You were always brave, beautiful Meta!" he said with something of admiration in his voice. "Don't you dread death?"

"Oh! no, no," I muttered eagerly.
"I pray for it! I long for it!"

And I raised my hands to my head, and pressed them to my throbbing temples.

"How's this?" he cried, seizing my left hand, and holding it a moment, "you are not married yet, I see?"

<sup>&</sup>quot; No."

<sup>· &</sup>quot;And when?" —

"Never, never, oh! you know it," I cried despairingly. "You have broken my heart, do not mock me in my sorrow!"

A sharp, bitter cry—the cry of a wounded animal rather than of a man—broke from Mirko as I spoke, and his lips moved convulsively for some seconds ere he faltered —

- "Margaret—speak—for Heaven's sake
  —have you not betrayed me?"
- "Oh! Mirko, oh! my love, my love," was all that I could say.
- "Then God help us!" he groaned as he cast himself on the stone bench with his face buried in his hands.

I ran to his side; I called upon him by name, using all the endearing titles to which my tongue had grown so familiar. I begged him to look up and take courage.

I clasped his hands in my eagerness as I knelt by his side, forgetful of the wrong he had done me, forgetful of his wife, forgetful of all but his grief and my own love.

For awhile he took no heed of my entreaties; then suddenly withdrawing his hands from his face, he lifted me, and placed me on the bench at his side. He spoke then in low, broken accents, with his head averted—speaking almost more to himself than to me.

"It was my madness, Meta; I loved you so madly that, when they declared you false, my jealousy blinded me, and instead of silencing your slanderers I cried for 'proofs,' proofs of your faithlessness—as if you could be faithless! They wrote me letters—letters full of 'tender concern for the shock it would give me,' they said—curse them!—telling me that you were

going to marry Villiers—had been affianced to him for months past—and had led me to declare my love to laugh at me when my back was turned. They even said," he muttered through his clenched teeth, "that you had sent me away to marry Villiers in my absence."

- "Who did this?" I faltered.
- "Perdicaris, and his wife, perhaps their daughter," he answered bitterly.
  - "God forgive them!"
- "Forgive them!" he cried savagely, "say rather may He crush them, overwhelm them with every"—
- "Hush, Mirko," I whispered, terrified, their daughter loved you—it was for her sake"—
- "For her sake!" he repeated with a mocking laugh, "and have not they wrecked her life as well as broken our hearts this day? But you do not know,"

he almost sobbed, "miserable child, you do not know" —

"Yes—I know all," I said quickly, anxious to spare him the confession, "I know the worst."

"How?"

"I-oh! Mirko-I was present."

A cry broke from his lips.

"You were present, Margaret, and do not curse me? You were present, and did not stab me?"

He turned his face to me as he spoke, quivering and drawn with emotion, yet with a look of wonder, almost of awe upon it.

"Hate me, abhor and despise me, Margaret," he whispered hurriedly, "but do not look at me with that tearless, heart-broken look—if you do not want to kill me!"

"I cannot weep," I muttered wearily.

- "Then for pity's sake, reproach me, condemn me, tell me you never loved me—anything, anything—but that your life is blighted by me."
- "I cannot!" I cried, and burst into a passion of tears.

There was a silence for some minutes, broken only by my sobs, and then I rose, and stretched out my hand to him, faltering —

- "I would ask you a question, Mirko, ere we part. Did you love Merika Perdicaris?"
- "Never," he replied earnestly, clasping my hand between his own, and laying his head upon it. "I never thought of her but as a fragile, delicate child; never dreamt she ever looked upon me in any light but that of a friend—almost a brother until they told me.

"I see the whole scheme now," he groaned after a moment's pause, "they forced me into this marriage to make me silent about the property, and I—Heaven help me!—fell into their trap, thinking to make her happy at least, and to be revenged upon you!"

"And so you will make her happy, Mirko," I whispered, trying hard to steady my voice. "Go to her, and be kind to her—as you know how to be—and she will be happy!"

" And I?"

"You will be patient for my sake—as I shall be brave for yours."

"No, my Angel-Margaret," he said sadly. "I can face death without shrinking, but not endure life without hope."

"Mirko!" I cried wildly, a dreadful fear flashing across me as he spoke, "you

will not attempt your life? Oh! my love, promise me you will not!"

"I will do nothing to pain you," he replied, "if I can help it;" and that was all.

"And now we must part," I said with all the firmness I could summon, and then added, hurriedly, dreading lest I should break down ere the few words were spoken which I desired to speak, "Remember that if I have aught to pardon you it is forgiven, even as I trust to your forgiving me for any pain I may have unwittingly caused you;" and then, laying my hand gently on his bowed head, I falteringly added—"Be brave, Mirko, and try and meet this sorrow with a stout heart—and may God help you!"

"Farewell, then, if it must be farewell," he cried in a voice vibrating with emotion, and the effort to overcome it; "yet I would ask you a favour, Meta, ere I go."

And he rose from the bench, and held my two hands in his as he gazed into my face.

- "What is it?"
- "Merika is so young, so childish, and so friendless, Margaret; will you be kind to the poor girl when I am gone?"
- "I will be a sister to her, if she will let me!" I cried eagerly.
- "God bless you for it, Meta!" he said fervently, and clasping me in his arms he bent down his head, and pressed his lips to mine in a long, last kiss.

For a moment I rested in his embrace held tightly by his encircling arms. I forgot all but that this was our parting for evermore, and I did not even try to disengage myself. For a moment I leant against his heart, feeling it beat wildly against my breast, and then I stood alone, and he was gone—for ever.



## CHAPTER XII.

## MERIKA.

Then to her own sad heart mutter'd the Queen,
"Will the child kill me with her innocent talk?"

Guinevere. TENNYSON.

E was gone! And I stood there where he had left me with a world of tumultuous emotions at my heart—alone for evermore.

"Where had he gone—and what would he do?" were the questions I asked myself again and again, blaming myself passionately for not having exacted some pledge from him that he would do nothing rash in his first agony of sorrow. "He said he would not pain me if he could help

t," I said; "therefore he will not, oh! surely he will not, attempt his life!"

"'Be kind to the poor girl when I am gone,' he said. Then will he leave her desolate upon her wedding-day? And she loves him, unhappy child! though not as I do—she cannot love him as I do!"

And I fell on my knees with my hands clasped over my face, and rested my head on the cold stone bench.

But even in the midst of my grief there was one drop of joy in the thought that at beast he had not betrayed me. No, he had loved me and been true to me, and though they had robbed me of him, his heart was mine and mine only. And then my own words of the morning recurred to me like the burden of a song, "It is a dream, a hideous dream, but I shall wake and find it gone. For he is mine and I am his—

yes, I shall wake and find it gone." Would he go away and travel in distant lands, I wondered, trying to crush his sorrow by fatigue and hardship? Or would he plunge wildly into the brilliant society of some capital, and try and drown his grief in dissipation and excitement? Or would he yield up his shipwrecked life to the service of Heaven, and enter some holy order where duty and penance would exclude the memory of the past? Men had been known to do all these, and his was just the passionate, impulsive nature to seek refuge from despair in some such course.

To my own future I gave not a thought; it was a blank from which all interest had gone—a desert through which I must pass alone—a night in which the moon had set—and its end—death. Even as I had reached this point in my reflections a light

hand was laid upon my shoulder, and I looked up to see Merika standing beside me. There was a look of childish concern upon her pretty face, which quickly changed to an expression of entreaty as I shrank back from her touch in my first unreasoning anger.

"I beg your pardon," she timidly said.
"I saw—I fancied you were in trouble, and I was so sorry for you."

She spoke in Italian, and her soft mellow voice touched me strangely.

"No, you are mistaken," I answered, harshly. "I am happy, quite happy! Who could fail to be so in this world?"

"May I sit down here beside you?" asked she, as I rose from my knees and sat down on the stone bench. "I am waiting for someone," she continued, looking about, "and he does not come."

Something in the simple plaintiveness of her voice went to my heart as she said it, and I remembered his words, "Be kind to her when I am gone."

"Who is it you are expecting?" I asked more gently.

"My husband," she answered proudly, a bright flush covering her face as she spoke. "We were wedded to-day, and I have come here to meet him as he passes. See!" she cried, with childish glee, pointing to her richly broidered jacket, "I put this on to please him for, once, months ago, when I ventured not even to hope that he returned my love, he said I looked beautiful in this costume. Am I beautiful, do you think?" she asked suddenly, turning her full face towards me.

"Very, very beautiful!" I answered, half unconsciously.

"I fear he thinks me very childish," she

said, with a grave shake of her little head, "for he looks almost sad when I ask him such questions, and will not answer me. And I only wish to be good and pretty for his sake, and to please him!"

I could not speak, and I turned my head away to hide my brimming tears.

"There!" was her disappointed cry, as she noticed and misunderstood the movement, "I have made you think me silly and frivolous too, whereas I am only happy—so happy that I—that I would wish the whole world to know my joy and rejoice in it—so happy that I could almost die for very happiness!"

And as she said it she slipped her two hands into mine with a confiding, childish grace, and laughed a merry, silvery little laugh.

"Oh! Heaven help thee, my poor child,"
I murmured, taking her into my arms,

with a world of compassion in my heart for the unconscious girl before me.

"Oh! don't, don't say that," cried Merika, disengaging herself with frightened movement, and bursting into tears. "Are you all bent on bringing me ill-luck on my wedding-day? The old woman cursing me at the very church door because I had no money with me, and you—you looking sad and tearful the minute I say I am happy!"

"Nay, dear Merika—I may call you so, may I not?" I said, taking her half reluctant hand in mine—"you must not misunderstand me. God knows I had no wish to cloud your joy this day"—and I choked down a sob as I said so—"but the world is so full of sorrow, and we none of us know what grief may be coming upon us, even when we are happiest!"

She looked at me with wide, open eyes in which the tears still glistened.

- "I do not understand you," she said impatiently.
- "I scarcely understand myself," I replied wearily; "but Merika"—
  - "How do you know my name?"
- "Oh! I know all about you," I told her, with a faint attempt at a smile. "Your maiden name was Perdicaris, and you are now—you are now"—

But my voice died away, and she gaily concluded the sentence —

"I am now Merika Stefanović! Is it not a pretty name? But perhaps you know him too," she cried eagerly, "Mirko, my husband?"

My lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"Oh! if you knew how great, and good,

and noble he is," she went on, "you would understand how proud I am to have won such love as his!"

Much more she said in praise of him whose worth she could not comprehend, and I listened in silent misery and was patient for his sake.

"Here comes my mother," she said at last, as a somewhat hasty footstep sounded on the gravel behind us, "and she looks anxious, aye, and angry. What can it mean?"

"Merika, Merika!" cried Helen Perdicaris, in a voice that trembled with agitation, "here is a letter for you; I know not what to think. What!" she exclaimed, as I rose from my seat and stood confronting her, "you have not spoken to—to that woman?"

And she pointed insolently towards me.

- "Mother, dear mother!"
- "Don't touch her—don't look at her!" cried Helen Perdicaris, her voice rising almost to a scream as Merika put out her hand towards me. "She is a demon—a viper; she has wrecked your life this very day!"
- "Give me that letter," I sternly demanded, pointing to the one she held.
- "Give you the letter!" repeated she.
  "Are you mad?"
- "No, I have defeated your efforts to drive me so," I answered bitterly; "but I must and will have that letter!"
  - "Will you?"
- "Yes, or else, as there is justice in Heaven, I will go and proclaim your infamy among your assembled guests!" I cried passionately.
  - "They would not believe you," she re-

plied scornfully, a deadly pallor overspreading her features. "And what have you to tell?"

- "Oh! I could inform them how the honoured merchant Perdicaris had accumulated his vast wealth—how a certain poor Greek was entrusted with a property that the rich man could give no account of"—
  - "Lies, base slanderous lies!"
- "Not so, Helen Perdicaris; no more untrue than that his wife wrote letters"—
- "Oh! hush, hush," she cried, with a look of terror towards her daughter. "You are in error—I will explain, but not here, not now!"
- "Give me that letter, and I will spare you," I said, lowering my voice so that she alone should hear me.
- "How should I trust you—why should you spare me?"

- "For your daughter's sake," I replied gravely.
- "And what will you do with the letter?"
- "Break its tidings gently to her, unhappy child!"
  - "Then you know its contents?"
  - "I fear so."
- "Then it is your doing," she cried, "and you have done this to break her heart!" and she wrung her hands with a kind of despair. "And why should I bribe you to silence?"

I made no answer, but, passing by her, went a few steps in the direction of the restaurant.

"Come back! come back!" she exclaimed when she saw my intention; "here, take it," and she flung me the letter, "and a mother's curse upon you if she dies!"

And she hurried away.

"What is it? what is it? I don't understand," asked Merika peevishly. "You all know something or other concerning me, and tell me nothing, just as if I were a mere child!" and she stamped her foot upon the grass, and began to cry afresh.

"Merika, you must try and be calm, and listen to me," I said, gently, drawing her to the seat beside me. "I want to tell you a story, and to ask your advice."

"My advice?"

"Yes, Merika, your advice. Will you listen to me?"

"Oh! yes, with pleasure—until he comes," and she looked round as she spoke, with a little sigh.

I took her hand in mine, and with a painful tightening at my heart and a voice

that trembled despite all my effort, I told her the story of my love as briefly and simply as I could, telling her I knew the actors in it, but not naming them.

At first she listened listlessly, turning at every moment to see if he were coming, and sighing when she saw him not. Then she seemed to become a little more interested in my sad little narrative, and gradually became completely absorbed in it, keeping her large eyes on mine with a sort of fascination, and clasping my hands tightly in sympathy with the sorrows of these unknown sufferers. Her cheek blanched with pity when I told her how the lovers were separated by a treacherous plot, and how the man married a girl he liked and esteemed, but did not love, to revenge himself upon the woman he adored.

"Oh! what misery for all three," she cried compassionately. "What will become of them?"

"Ah! what, indeed!" I echoed sadly.

"And is it not fearful to think how this man's rashness—his unthinking thirst for vengeance—has brought misery to the two women who so dearly love him?"

"Oh! how can you reproach him!" she cried. "Had you ever loved as I do, you would understand what a fearful struggle he must have gone through before taking such a course!"

It was hard to sit there calmly, and blame him, and listen to this girl's defence of him, but I had set myself the task, and I would not shrink from it. His wife's lips should absolve him even as my heart had done.

"But think of the unhappy women!"

said I, "think what the guilty weakness of one man has cost these two blameless girls!"

"Nothing to what he suffers!" cried she. "Oh! it is clear you never can have loved."

Her words pierced me to the heart, and it was with difficulty I smothered a cry.

"Is not this love?" I asked myself a little bitterly, "the torture I am enduring to spare this girl—for his sake!"

But aloud I asked her gently -

- "And what would you advise him—them, I mean—to do?"
- "He must leave them—leave them both for ever," was her decided answer. "It is the best—the only course open to him."
  - "What, leave his poor young wife?"
- "Yes, even so," she said sadly. "You would not have him live a lie? Besides,

she would learn the truth in time, and then "-

"And the women, Merika, the women—what of them?" I asked eagerly.

"They should be friends," she replied, with the quick unfaltering decision of a child; "their common love and sorrow should make them sisters!"

"Merika," I whispered tremblingly, passing my arms round her slender frame"Merika, let me be your sister."

With a piercing scream she started to her feet, and pointed to the letter I still held. I gave it to her, and watched her, as trembling from head to foot, she broke it open.

"I don't understand, I can't understand," she wailed piteously, with a wild, vacant look on her fair young face. "What does it all mean?"

"Come home with me, dear child, and I will tell you," I whispered gently, passing my arm round her.

"And who are you?" she asked. "Ah! you are Margaret—Margaret Seymour. Yes, I will go with you. He says you are kind, and good, and gentle—and I am frightened," she said, shuddering. "I don't understand."

She let me draw her arm through mine, and lead her quietly in the direction of our lodgings. She asked no question, but with scared, frightened look still on her face, muttered at intervals—

"I don't understand! What can it mean?"

As for me I could not speak. My own sorrow came back with tenfold intensity after the forced calmness of the last hour, and I walked slowly on supporting poor

Merika's shuddering frame towards home. At last we reached our lodgings. The door was open, and we ascended the stairs without encountering anyone; but as we slowly toiled up the steep staircase the sound of George's voice struck on my ear.

"Don't give way, Florrie," he was saying. "We must find her, you know—but
it horrified me to hear of the risk she had
run—only think if she had recognized the
infernal scoundre! It would have killed
her, I believe—but Phil did not see him,
he says, and he is sure she cannot have
done so either."

"Tersatto," he said, as though in answer to some question of Florrie's, "I've just told you I've been all over it without finding her, and it was in coming back that I heard of this damnable"—

But ere he had time to say more I had entered with Merika on my arm. Florence started forward with a little cry as she saw me.

"Oh! Margaret, oh! my darling!" she cried, throwing her arms round me.

I disengaged myself quickly, almost impatiently—I could not bear her sympathy just yet.

"Florrie was anxious about you," said George, with an alarmed look at me, "she feared you would overtax your strength with so long a walk. And you are pale, Margaret, you look ill."

"I—shall—not—die," I gasped, and consciousness left me.





## CHAPTER XIII.

## CONCLUSION.

The book is concluded, and closed like the day,
The hand that has written it lays it away.

LONGFELLOW.

KNOW not how the days went by,

for mine were spent at Merika's bedside in a darkened room, where she lay in a semi-stupor, from which she would rouse herself at long intervals for a few minutes at a time to look wistfully about for me, to clasp my hand feebly in her little burning palm, and sometimes whisper—

"Sister Meta."

The house was hushed and silent; the

children walked on tiptoe as they passed the chamber door. The doctor came and looked at her, and felt her pulse, and muttered —

"A little less feverish—a little weaker. Some great shock to the nervous system, eh? Time and quiet; there's nothing to be done; it must be left to time and perfect quiet."

And consulting his watch, he would trot briskly downstairs.

I had seen little of either Florrie or George since the evening I had brought Merika home. My brother-in-law I would sometimes only see when I opened the door to let the doctor out. He was generally standing on the landing outside to hear his report, and he would put out his hand and clasp mine for a moment, and then let it go without a word. Florence,

after having made repeated entreaties to be allowed to share my duties of nurse to Merika, had submitted to my decision, and contented herself with taking my place for only about two hours of an evening, when she sent me to lie down. But I could not rest, and would kneel by my bedside in my own silent room and rise refreshed to resume my duties.

"Margaret," whispered Florence one evening—perhaps a fortnight after that miserable day—coming into the room earlier than her wont, "it is such a lovely evening. Won't you go and lie on the sofa in the drawing-room for half-an-hour? It would do you good, dear, and I'll stay here gladly."

<sup>&</sup>quot;But she may wake," I hesitated.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Then I will call you directly."

<sup>&</sup>quot;And George?"

"He is out with the children," she answered; then added with tears in her eyes, "Besides, dearest, he will never say a word again to pain you. You do not know him."

I left the dark, silent room with Merika sleeping calmly and Florence watching by her side, and I went into the little sittingroom, with its windows wide open, and a flood of light and air flowing in. The change was so sudden and so new to me now, after my long watching in the sickroom, that it brought the tears to my eyes and a sort of tightening to my heart. As I was crossing the room, my eyes accidentally caught the reflection of my face in the faded old mirror between the win-I walked over to it, and looked with a sort of quiet curiosity at the face before me. Pale, haggard, old—could that be Margaret Seymour? I looked at it in wonderment, not regret. There was an expression, too, in it that puzzled me—endurance. What? Should not I die then, though my life was ended? Was I not to be allowed to close the volume of my earthly troubles and lay me down and rest? I turned away with a sigh. It was hard to see a long, lonely life seemingly revealed in that grave, patient face.

I looked about for a book; I could not lie down and think; my thoughts were so sad.

"Surely there must be some papers about," I thought, "that will while away an hour." But no, I could not find them. "Perhaps they are in George's room; I'll just look and see."

Yes, in a pile on the chest of drawers lay some dozen newspapers.

"How strange they should all be here,"

I said to myself, "almost as though they had been hidden away."

I took them, and, returning to the sitting-room, began to turn them idly over as I sat close to one of the windows to catch the fading light. But somehow they could not fix my thoughts, and one after the other I tossed carelessly aside until I came to the last—a shabby little local paper in Italian. I was about to lay it aside with the rest, when my eye was attracted by the word "Cattaro" at the head of a short paragraph. It did not contain much news-some vague scraps of intelligence concerning the movements of the troops and the capture of some very arduous leader of the rebels.

"We are as yet in ignorance of his name and nationality," it said, "and only know that he is said to have but lately joined the insurgents and to be a person of rank and influence. He is reported to be dangerously wounded."

The door opened as I had read these words and Maria Paolich entered, holding a folded paper in her hand. She laid it on the corner of the table, and withdrew without having perceived me as I sat perfectly motionless in the evening dusk.

· I remained quite still for some moments after she had closed the door, and then, rising from my seat, I went over to the table and took up the paper she had just placed upon it.

I looked at it an instant and then unfolded it. It was that day's number of the little local newspaper I had just been reading, and I went close to the window to catch the last faint rays of daylight to

read it by. I had some little trouble to find what I wanted, but I found it headed "Cattaro" as before:—

"Intelligence has just reached us of the death of the famous leader of the insurgents of whom we made mention in our impression of yesterday evening. A most satisfactory letter from the Prince of Montenegro completely discountenances the conduct of this his late compatriot—Mirko Stefanović."

THE END.





